BIG 52 PAGES

# Cowboy Love

JUNE

10¢

NO. 10

THE RETURN OF CLIFF MASTERS • TRAIL TO ROMANCE

A STRANGER AND HIS DOG • VENGEANCE AT MESA RIDGE

Exec. Editor, WILL LIEBERSON
Art Editor, AL JETTER

# Cowboy Love

Editor, ROY ALD
Assoc., J. Graham

## THE RETURN OF CLIFF MASTERS

CLIFF MASTERS RODE INTO KAREN'S HEART, LAUGHING, DASHING AND RECKLESS, BRINGING HER A LOVE AS VAST AND INSPIRING AS THE PRAIRIES UPON WHICH IT WAS BORN. BUT THEN TOO SOON THIS INCOMPARABLE LOVE WAS DRIVEN INTO THE WASTELANDS OF HATE!

CLIFF, GIVE HIM A CHANCE! YOU'VE TAKEN EVERYTHING HE OWNS -- THE TAVERN, HIS HOUSE! AND ONLY BECAUSE HE KNOWS ME!

THAT'S ENOUGH REASON! I'LL DO THE SAME TO ANY MAN THAT HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH YOU! I'LL NEVER LET YOU FORGET THAT DAY FIVE YEARS AGO!

BLOND AND RADIANTLY LOVELY, KAREN DARE RODE HER PALAMINO ALONG BOULDER TRAIL -- SIGHING AT HER LONELINESS AND THE WISTFUL BEAUTY OF THE LAND. THEN.....

SOUNDS LIKE A RIDER COMING -- AND FAST! I HOPE HE KNOWS ENOUGH ABOUT THIS TRAIL TO MAKE A WIDE TURN ON THE BEND!

CLIP CLOP! CLIP CLOP

BUT A YOUNG RIDER TURNED THE BEND SHARPLY, AT A DEMON'S PACE! THE HORSE REARED WILDLY AND PITCHED THE UNSUSPECTING RIDER VIOLENTLY UPWARD. KAREN GASPED A WARNING TOO LATE!

HEY--!

LOOK OUT--!

COWBOY LOVE, June, 1950, Vol. 2, No. 10, is published bi-monthly by Fawcett Publications, Inc., Fawcett Place, Greenwich, Conn. Entered as second class matter April 6, 1949, at the post office, Greenwich, Conn., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Additional entry at Louisville, Ky. Copyright 1950 by Fawcett Publications, Inc. Trademark of Fawcett Publications, Inc. Editorial and advertising offices, 67 W. 44th St., N. Y. 18, N. Y. Send remittances and letters concerning subscriptions, change of address, etc., to Circulation Dept., Fawcett Pl., Greenwich, Conn. Subscription rate 12 issues for $1.20 in U. S. possessions and Canada. Foreign, $1.70 in international money order, U. S. funds. Printed in U. S. A.

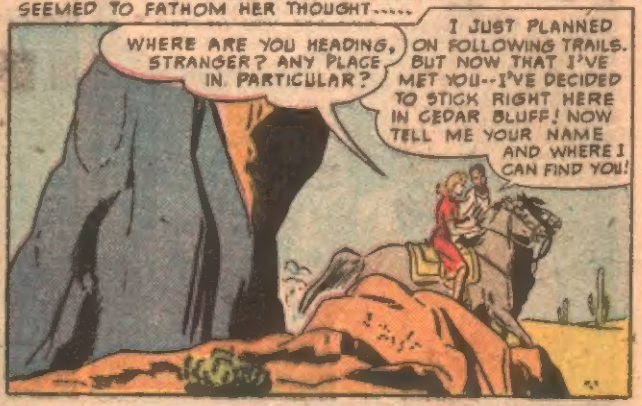
THEN THE GROUND SHUDDERED UNDER THE BEAT OF PURSUING HOOFS. THE FALLEN RIDER HAD BEEN FLEEING-- PERHAPS FOR HIS LIFE. KAREN LED THE HORSES HASTILY OFF THE ROAD AND DRAGGED THE INERT BODY OF THE UNCONSCIOUS COWHAND TOWARD THE HIGH BRUSH....

AS KAREN MINISTERED TO THE UNCONSCIOUS COWBOY, HIS EYES OPENED-- AND A SMILE AS BOLDLY FREE AND SPIRITED AS THE RUSHING PRAIRIE WIND BRIGHTENED HIS TRAIL-BRONZED FACE.....

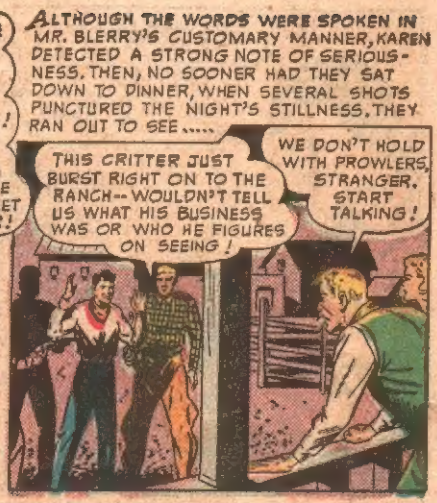
WITH A CHARACTERISTICALLY RECKLESS CHUCKLE-- AS THOUGH THOROUGHLY ENJOYING THE SUDDEN WARM FLUSH IN KAREN'S CHEEKS-- HE DREW HER IMPULSIVELY INTO HIS ARMS AND KISSED HER.....

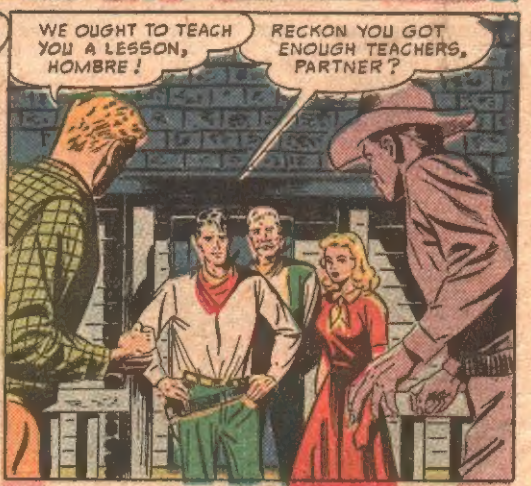
KAREN STALKED OFF ANGRILY-- HER HEARTBEAT STILL TRIPPING UNDER THE SPELL OF HIS DIZZYING KISS. BUT HE CAUGHT UP TO HER AND APOLOGIZED IN A MANNER SO UNEXPECTEDLY SINCERE AND DISARMING, THAT SHE COULD NOT HELP BUT FORGIVE HIM....

AS THEY RODE ALONG THE TRAIL TOGETHER, KAREN FELT THE APPRAISAL OF HIS ADMIRING EYES. SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHO HE WAS OR WHERE HE CAME FROM--SHE ONLY KNEW THAT SHE WANTED HIM TO LINGER THERE A WHILE LONGER. AND CLIFF SEEMED TO FATHOM HER THOUGHT.....



KAREN SHRUGGED AND SMILED AT HER OWN ROMANTIC NOTIONS. HE WAS ATTRACTIVE ALL RIGHT, BUT AS UNPREDICTABLE AS A RAMPAGING STEER. SHE WOULD PROBABLY NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN! BACK AT THE RANCH, GARY RYDER WAS WAITING FOR HER-- PATIENTLY PERSISTENT AND A REAL FRIEND, THOUGH HE WOULD HAVE HOPED TO MEAN MORE....

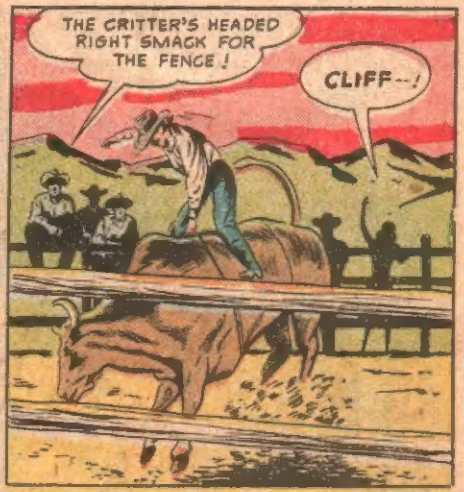




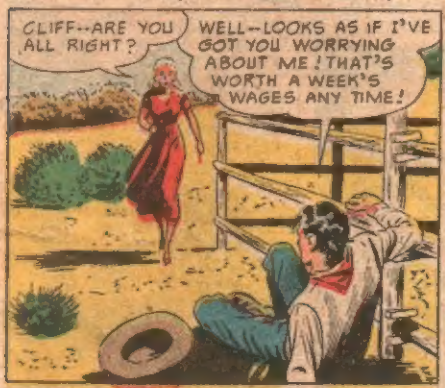

THE MEN STARED INTO THE STEEL-GRAY DEPTHS OF CLIFF'S UNWAVERING EYES. DANGER LURKED THERE AND A WELL-REHEARSED DARING. THEY TURNED AND WALKED OFF AND.....

AND THEN CLIFF MASTERS TURNED TO THE BLOND GIRL WHO WAS STRUGGLING TO CALM HER TREMULOUS HEART. THE SAME EYES, THAT A MOMENT AGO WERE SMOLDERING WITH A FEARLESS THREAT--WERE NOW AGLOW WITH A GENTLE FLAME....

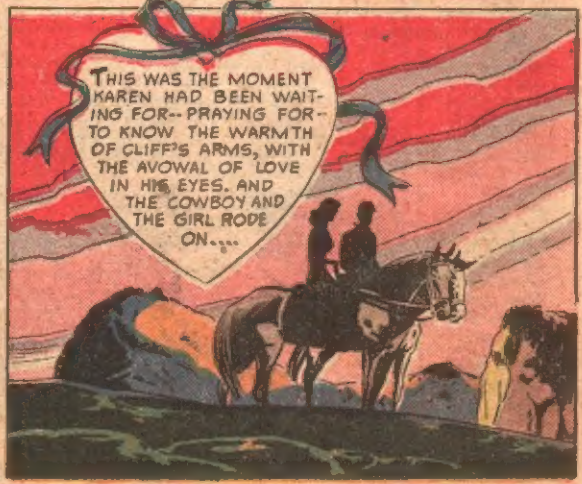
AND SO, KAREN BEGAN TO SEE A LOT OF CLIFF MASTERS. HE WAS YOUNG AND WILD, YES-- BUT HE WASN'T BAD! HE JUST LOVED LIFE, LOVED LIVING EVERY VITAL, EXCITING MINUTE OF IT.....




IN A DESPERATE MEASURE TO SHAKE HIS TORMENTOR, THE ENRAGED ANIMAL PLUNGED TOWARD THE BARRICADING LOGS. BUT AT THE LAST INSTANT, WITH THE AGILITY OF A MOUNTAIN GOAT, CLIFF LEAPED CLEAR, AND...




THEIR PLAYGROUND WAS THE VAST, ENDLESS STRETCHES OF PRAIRIE-- WHERE THE DISTANT MOUNTAINS BULGED GRANITE SHOULDERS AGAINST THE OPEN SKY. KAREN LEARNED THE WONDERMENT OF LOVE ...THE INSATIABLE YEARNING FOR ONE MAN ALONE....



BUT ALL WAS NOT AS PERFECT AS THE MEETING OF THEIR LIPS AND THE PLEDGE OF THEIR HEARTS. IN CLIFF, THERE WAS A SEARCHING, IRREPRESSIBLE RESTLESSNESS. KAREN WATCHED IT ANXIOUSLY. THEN, LATE ONE NIGHT.....

THE GOLD IN THE ASSAYER'S OFFICE! KAREN'S HEART TREMBLED AT THE MERE THOUGHT OF WHAT CLIFF CONTEMPLATED. BUT IN CLIFF'S EYES WAS THE LOOK OF BOLD AUDACITY SHE HAD COME TO KNOW AND FEAR!

BUT THE RECKLESS WRANGLER WAS SO INTENT UPON HIS BOLD PLAN THAT HE GAVE LITTLE THOUGHT TO THE EVIL OF HIS DEED!

CLIFF'S RECKLESS LAUGHTER ECHOED IN THE NIGHT AS HE RODE OFF-- AND KAREN WAS POWERLESS TO STOP HIM. SHE KNEW THE ASSAYER'S OFFICE WOULD BE HEAVILY GUARDED, AND IF HE WEREN'T KILLED-- AND DID MANAGE TO GET THE GOLD--HE WOULD BE HUNTED FOREVER-- AN OUTLAW!

I MUST STOP HIM, SOMEHOW! MR. BLERRY--! MR. BLERRY!

WHAT IS IT, CHILD? WHAT'S THE MATTER?

YOU MUST HELP ME... PLEASE, YOU MUST! IT'S CLIFF, HE'S DOING SOMETHING TERRIBLE!

BETWEEN THE TEARS OF A CHOKING SORROW SHE COULD NOT RESTRAIN, KAREN BLURTED OUT ALL SHE KNEW. MR. BLERRY CALLED THE BOYS HASTILY, AND SOON, THEY WERE READY FOR RIDING.....

I TRIED TO TELL HIM-- BUT HE WOULDN'T LISTEN!

IT'S A WRONG MOVE THAT BOY IS MAKING! HE DOES A LOT OF THINGS WITHOUT A MESS OF THINKING! HE'S SURE A WILD ONE, BUT I NEVER FIGURED HIM FOR THIS!

HE'LL BE KILLED... SOB... IF WE DON'T GET THERE IN TIME!

WE'RE SURE GOING TO TRY!

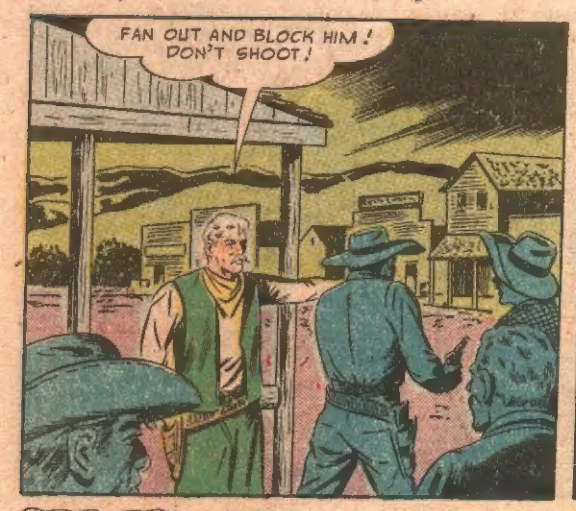
FURIOUSLY RACING HOOFS MATCHED THE POUNDING TEMPO OF HER HEART, AS THE BAND OF RIDERS HEADED TOWARD TOWN TO AVERT A MISSION OF DEATH. AND WHEN THEY GOT THERE, IN THE SCANT SHADOWS OF A PALE, EERIE MOON.....

COULD HE HAVE COME AND GONE?

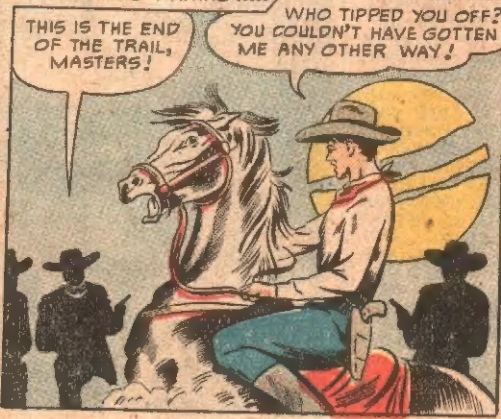
NOT YET, OR THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN SOME SHOOTING! HE'S PROBABLY BIDING HIS TIME SOMEWHERE... WE'LL WAIT!

LOOK--! HE WAS INSIDE! HE'S MAKING A BREAK FOR IT!

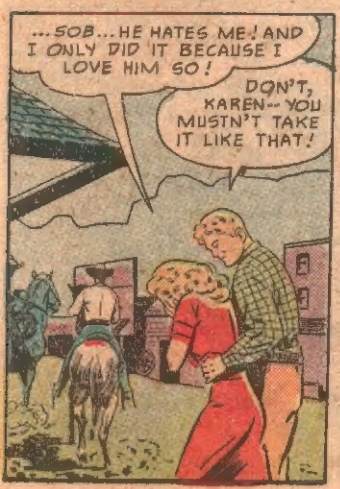
HE MUST HAVE HIS HORSE IN THE ALLEY!



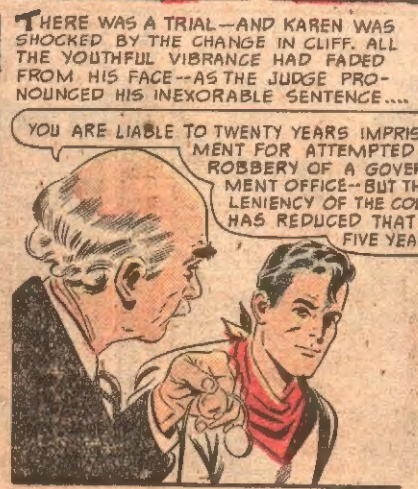

CLIFF MOVED LIKE A PHANTOM BORNE ON THE WIND. HE MOUNTED HIS STALLION AND MADE A DESPERATE DASH FOR SAFETY--BUT THE MEN WERE THERE WAITING.....



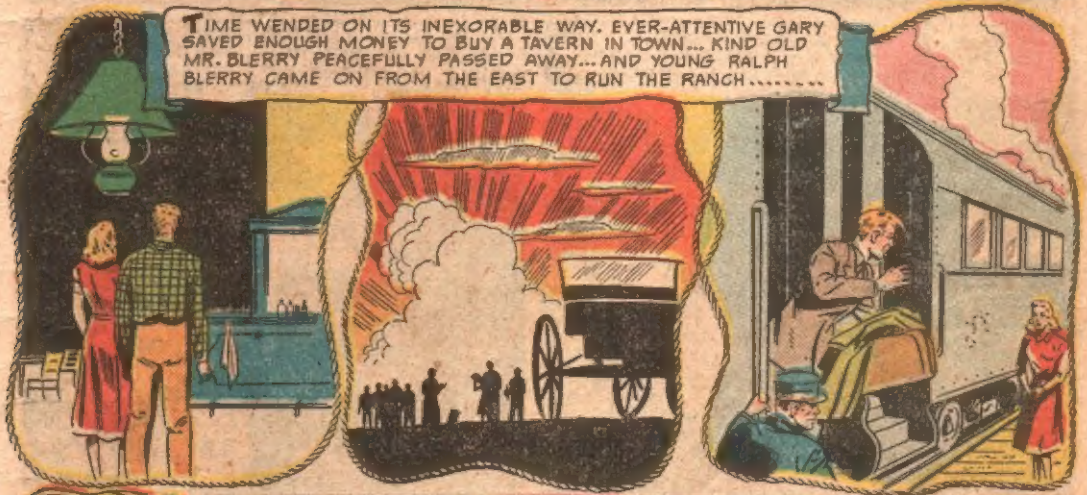

THEN CLIFF'S EYES SOUGHT HER OUT IN THE DARKNESS, AND THEY NARROWED TO TWO PINPOINTS OF FURY. THE TORTURED GIRL FELT THE VERY BLOOD IN HER HEART CONGEAL....




THERE WAS A TRIAL--AND KAREN WAS SHOCKED BY THE CHANGE IN CLIFF. ALL THE YOUTHFUL VIBRANCE HAD FADED FROM HIS FACE--AS THE JUDGE PRONOUNCED HIS INEXORABLE SENTENCE....



WHEN THE IRON GATE OF THE STATE PENITENTIARY SHUT BEHIND CLIFF, IT WAS AS THOUGH THE TIE WITH THE BLOND GIRL HE HAD LOVED WAS SEVERED FOREVER. KAREN WROTE A HUNDRED UNANSWERED LETTERS AND ASKED GARY TO TAKE HER THERE MANY, MANY TIMES. BUT ALWAYS, IT WAS THE SAME, TRAGICALLY THE SAME....




KAREN TOOK UP AGAIN THE HABITS OF EVERYDAY LIVING--BUT NEVER FOR A SINGLE INSTANT HAD SHE FORGOTTEN THE ONE LOVE THAT COULD NEVER LEAVE HER HEART! GARY ASKED TO MARRY HER, BUT HE REMAINED ONLY A GOOD FRIEND. THEN, ONE HEART-RENDING DAY.....

CLIFF SAW KAREN AGAIN AND AGAIN IN GARY'S PRESENCE--BUT NEVER ONCE, BY THE MEREST FLICKERING OF AN EYE, DID HE ACKNOWLEDGE HER EXISTENCE. ONE EVENING.....

WHAT IS IT? WHY ALL THE EXCITEMENT?

THERE'S A BIG CARD GAME GOING ON! AND GARY IS LOSING HEAVILY!

IT'S CLIFF--!

I-I'M AFRAID YOU'VE GOT ME OVER A BARREL, MASTERS!

THE HUSHED, AWED WHISPERS OF THE CROWD CARRIED TO TREMBLING KAREN. FOR AN ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE INSTANT CLIFF GLANCED HER WAY. THEN KAREN KNEW THE TERRIBLE TRUTH.....

HE'S DOING THIS TO PUNISH ME!

MY HAND, MISTER!

THAT CLEANS ME! YOU'VE WON MY HOUSE... MY TAVERN! EVERYTHING I OWN!

I'LL BE BORROWING SOME CASH AND I'LL EXPECT A CHANCE TO MAKE UP FOR MY LOSSES TOMORROW!

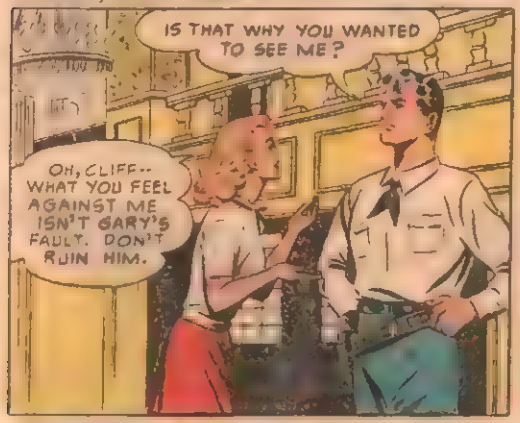
THE GAME'S OVER AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED! I'M NOT PLAYING ANY MORE!

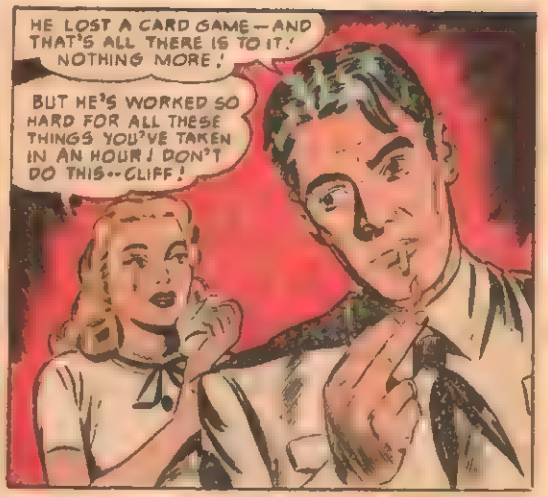
THE TEMPER OF THE ONLOOKERS ROSE TO A FEVER PITCH AND SEVERAL OF GARY'S FRIENDS RUSHED CLIFF. BUT HE STRUCK WITH A SUDDEN AND VENOMOUS FURY. ..

I PLAYED HIM FAIR AND SQUARE AND THAT ENDS THAT! AND THIS---!

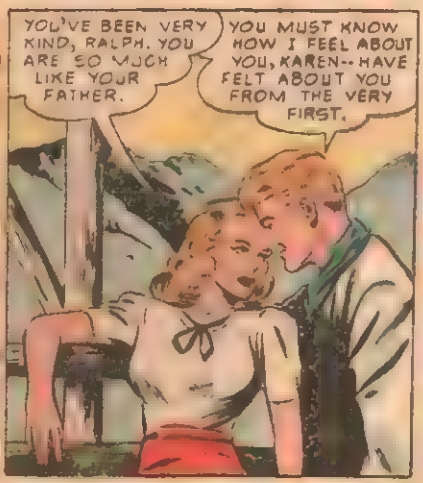
I RECKON A MAN'S GOT THE RIGHT TO DECIDE WHEN HE'S HAD ENOUGH GAMBLING! ANY MORE OBJECTIONS?

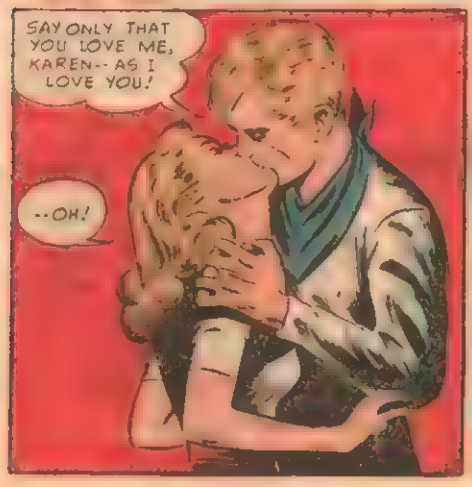
GARY REMAINED IN A SMALL HOTEL ROOM AFTER THAT, SICK AT HEART--BROKEN IN SPIRIT. HE WOULD NOT RESPOND TO KAREN'S SYMPATHIES. HUMBLY, KAREN WENT TO CLIFF.....



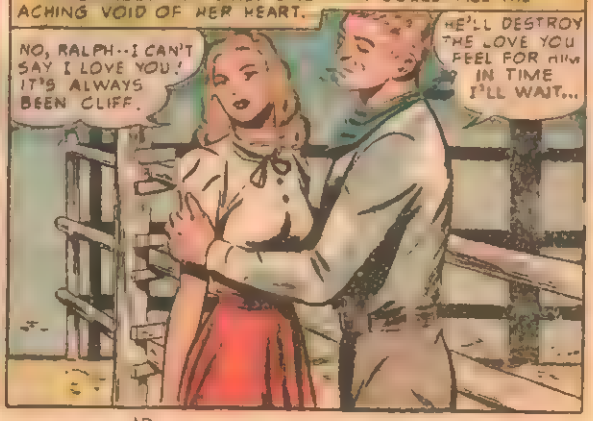




DEPRESSED AND APATHETIC, GARY REFUSED TO SEE OR SPEAK TO KAREN--OR TO ANYONE. MORE AND MORE HE KEPT TO HIS HOTEL. IT WAS DURING THESE DAYS THAT SHE CAME TO KNOW RALPH BERRY WELL FOR THE FIRST TIME. HE WAS COMFORTING, UNDERSTANDING.






BUT EVEN AS RALPH'S ARMS DREW HER CLOSE, AS HIS LIPS WERE ARDOROUSLY PRESSED TO HERS--KAREN KNEW --UNDENIABLY-THAT ONLY ONE MAN COULD FILL THE ACHING VOID OF HER HEART.



KAREN HAD THE STRANGE FEELING THAT CLIFF WAS WATCHING HER... WAITING. THERE'S NO GREATER TORMENT THAN FEARING THE ONE YOU LOVE! BUT THEN IT WAS TIME FOR THE FALL ROUNDUP AND FINALLY, THE BIG CATTLE DRIVE TO TOWN. IN HOPES OF MOMENTARY FORGETFULNESS, KAREN WENT ALONG.....

THERE'S SOMETHING INSPIRING ABOUT THE THOUSANDS OF THUNDERING HOOFS PUSHING FORWARD LIKE A GREAT MIGRATION!

I'VE NEVER MISSED THE FALL CATTLE DRIVE SINCE I WAS A LITTLE GIRL!

THE RANCH HAS PROSPERED UNDER YOUR HAND, RALPH. YOUR DAD WOULD HAVE BEEN MIGHTY-PROUD!

AFTER WE GET THE HERD TO MARKET, KAREN-- I'VE SOMETHING REAL IMPORTANT I WANT TO ASK YOU...

THEY MOVED AHEAD FOR UNEVENTFUL HOURS--UNTIL THE STARS WERE TWINKLING BEACONS OVERHEAD. THEN, INEXPLICABLY, THE GREAT HERD STOPPED. RALPH RODE AHEAD TO SEE WHAT WAS WRONG. HE RETURNED PALE AND SHAKEN...

RALPH--! WHAT'S THE MATTER? TELL ME?

GIDDAP, BOY! I'LL SEE WHAT'S WRONG FOR MYSELF!

THIS TRAIL IS MINE NOW! I BOUGHT THE OLD DEEDS FROM POP MINER! AND IT'S PERMANENTLY CLOSED TO THE BLERRY RANCH!

OH, NO--! NO!

OLD POP MINER, ONE OF THE TOWN'S FOUNDERS, HAD OWNED MANY OF THE TRAILS. BUT HE'D KEPT THEM FREE FOR THE TOWNSFOLK. CLIFF HAD BOUGHT THEM WITH THE ASSURANCE THAT WHEN THE OLD MAN DIED-- HE, TOO, WOULD KEEP THEM FREE. BUT NOW....

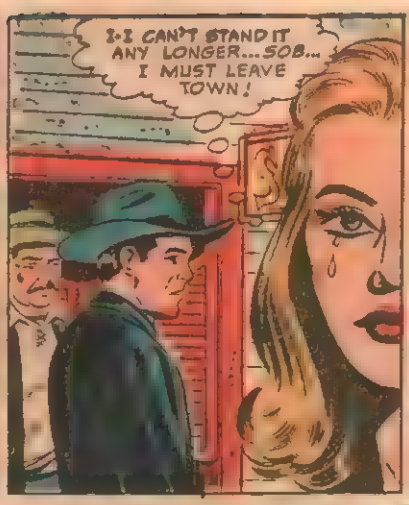
YOU CAN'T MEAN THIS, CLIFF! IF YOU CLOSE THE TRAILS YOU WILL RUIN THE ENTIRE BLERRY RANCH!

THE TRAILS ARE CLOSED!

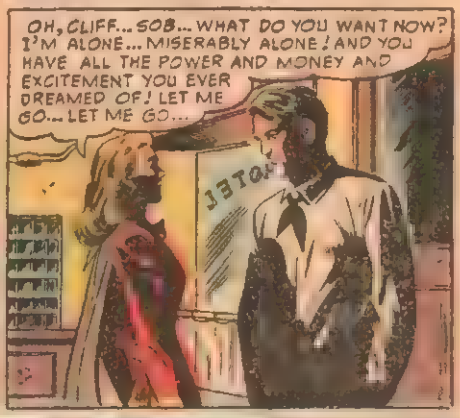
THEN YOU ARE OUT TO DESTROY RALPH, TOO--JUST AS YOU DID GARY. AND ONLY BECAUSE THEY KNOW ME!

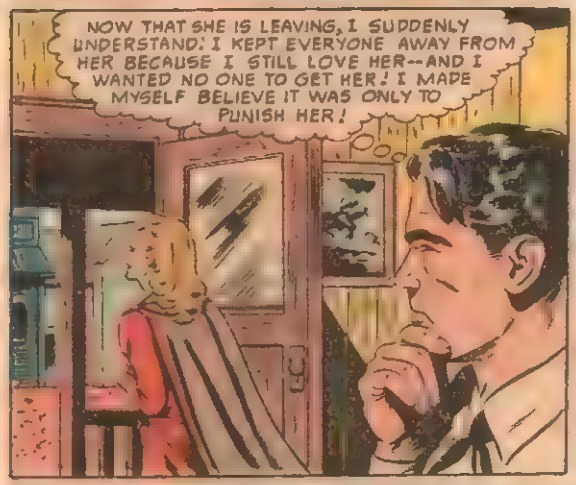
YES! AND ANY MAN THAT EVER SO MUCH AS DARES TO GO NEAR YOU! IN THIS WAY YOU'LL PAY FOR YOUR DECEIT!

AND THROUGH IT ALL, KAREN LONGED FOR THE WARMTH OF HIS ARMS, THE SWEET, CRUSHING TENDERNESS OF HIS LIPS. A HURTFUL MEMORY OF FIVE LONG YEARS PAST WOULD NOT LEAVE! IN THE DAYS TO FOLLOW, EVERYWHERE SHE WENT, SHE WAS AVOIDED AS THE PLAGUE. ALL WERE AFRAID TO FEEL THE WRATH OF CLIFF'S HAND....

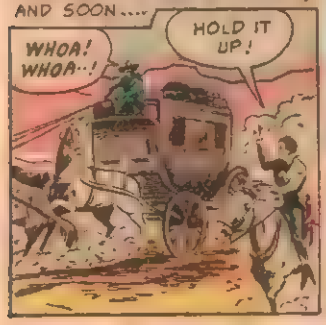


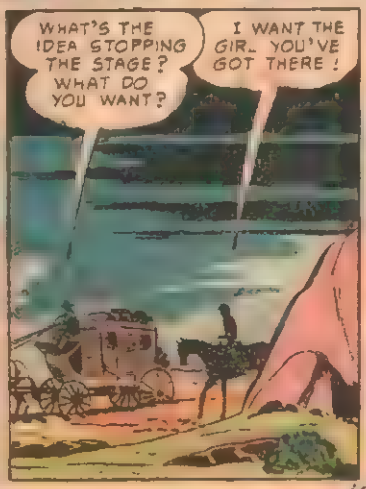

HASTILY, KAREN PACKED HER BAGS--THE SOBS TEARING AT HER THROAT. AND THEN, AS SHE WAS READY TO LEAVE, A TALL, ERECT FIGURE BLOCKED HER PATH.....



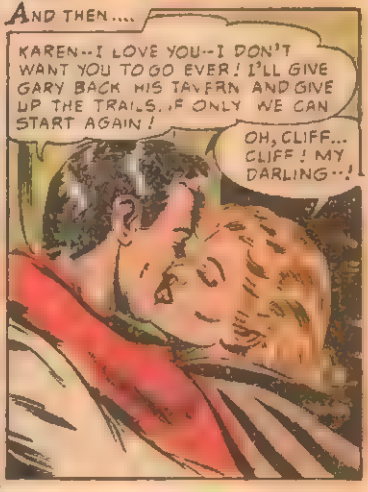



NOW CLIFF FACED THE TRUTH WITHIN HIMSELF FOR THE FIRST TIME! HE'D WANTED THE GOLD ONLY TO BE WITH KAREN--THAT'S ALL HE'D WANTED EVER SINCE HE FIRST MET HER. AND SHE'D HAD HIM CAUGHT ONLY TO SAVE HIM--SAVE THEIR LOVE! CLIFF MOUNTED IN FURIOUS PURSUIT, AND SOON....



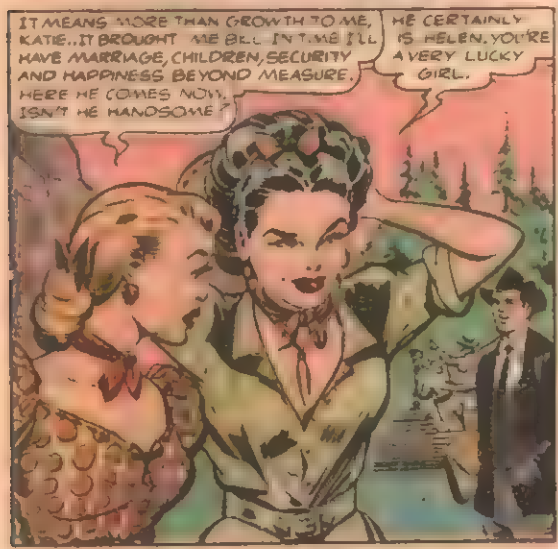

AND THEN....

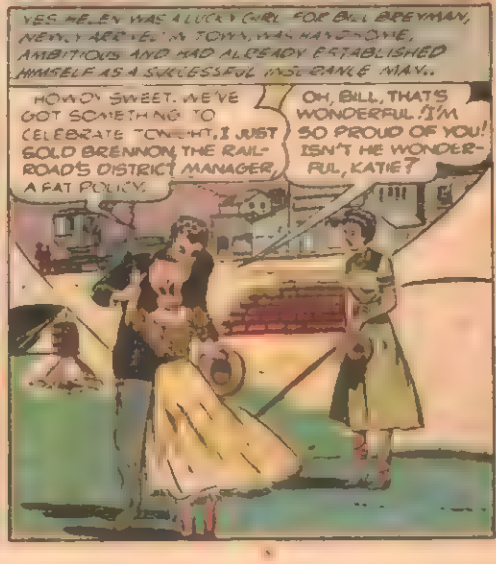


# TRAIL TO ROMANCE

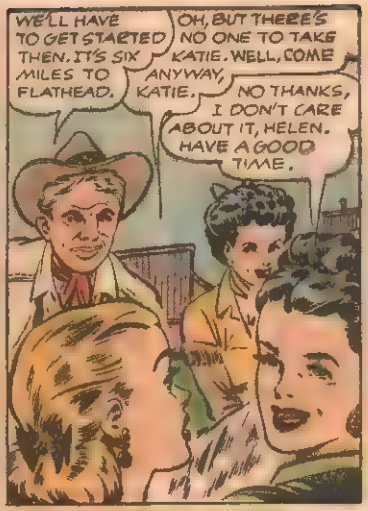
DOESN'T ALL THIS ACTIVITY STIR YOUR BLOOD, HELEN? THAT BLAST'S SYMBOLIC OF THE WAY CACTUS HAS MUSHROOMED. YES, HELEN, THIS TOWN'S COMING OF AGE.

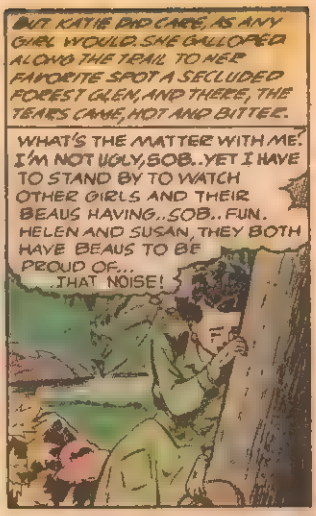
THE RAILROAD MADE BIG CHANGES IN THE FRONTIER TOWN OF CACTUS. IT BROUGHT GROWTH, PROSPERITY AND MANY NEW FACES AMONGST THESE TRAVELERS LATE FOUND LOVE A LOVE THAT TREMBLED BEFORE THE ANGRY CHARGE OF ENVY.

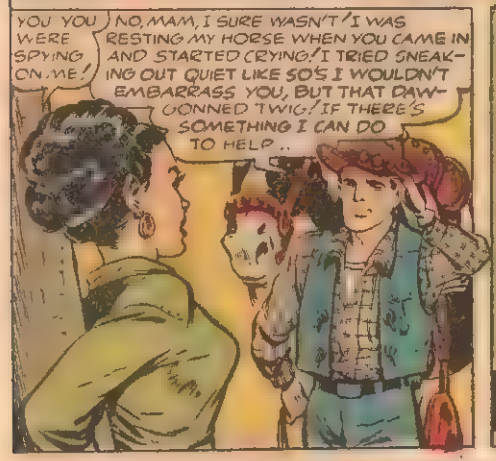


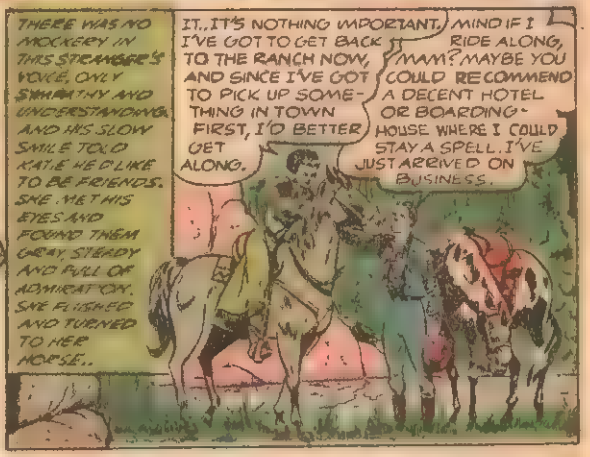



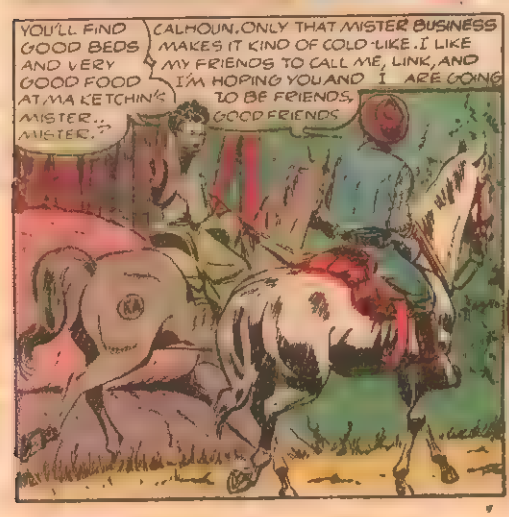
ENVY PLUCKED AT KATIE'S HEART AS SHE REGARDED THE HAPPY PAIR. SHE, TOO, YEARNED FOR SOMEONE TO LOVE AND BE PROUD OF.
HOWDY, TIM, KATIE... HELEN AND I WERE FIXING TO CELEBRATE A SALE I JUST MADE. HOW ABOUT YOU JOINING US? WE THOUGHT WE'D TAKE IN THAT DANCE AT FLATHEAD.
SOUNDS WONDERFUL!


WE'LL HAVE TO GET STARTED THEN. IT'S SIX MILES TO FLATHEAD.
OH, BUT THERE'S NO ONE TO TAKE KATIE. WELL, COME ANYWAY, KATIE.
NO THANKS, I DON'T CARE ABOUT IT, HELEN. HAVE A GOOD TIME.

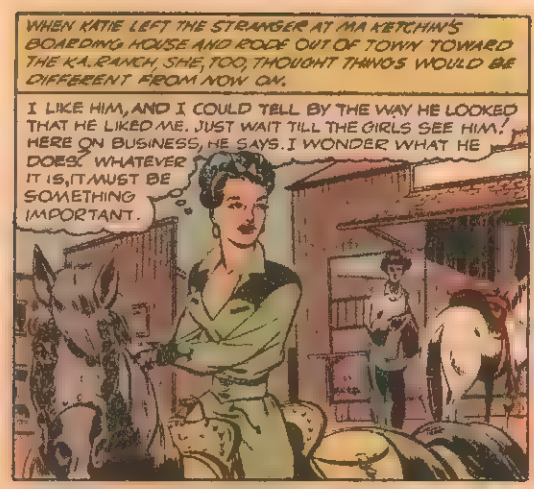

BUT KATIE DID CARE, AS ANY GIRL WOULD. SHE GALLOPED ALONG THE TRAIL TO HER FAVORITE SPOT A SECLUDED FOREST GLEN, AND THERE, THE TEARS CAME, HOT AND BITTER.
WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH ME? I'M NOT UGLY, SOB.. YET I HAVE TO STAND BY TO WATCH OTHER GIRLS AND THEIR BEAUS HAVING.. SOB.. FUN. HELEN AND SUSAN, THEY BOTH HAVE BEAUS TO BE PROUD OF... THAT NOISE!

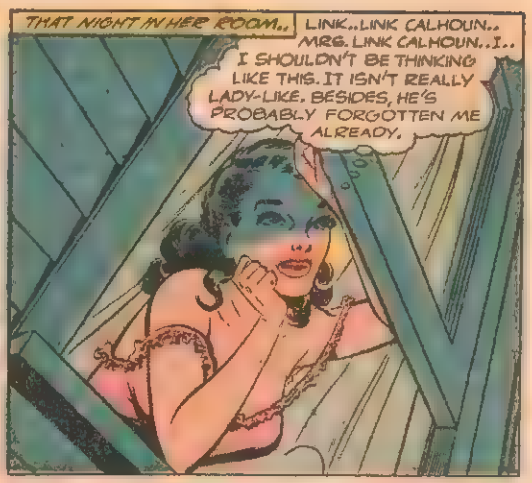

YOU YOU WERE SPYING ON ME!
NO, MAM, I SURE WASN'T! I WAS RESTING MY HORSE WHEN YOU CAME IN AND STARTED CRYING! I TRIED SNEAKING OUT QUIET LIKE SO'S I WOULDN'T EMBARRASS YOU, BUT THAT DAWGONNED TWIG! IF THERE'S SOMETHING I CAN DO TO HELP..

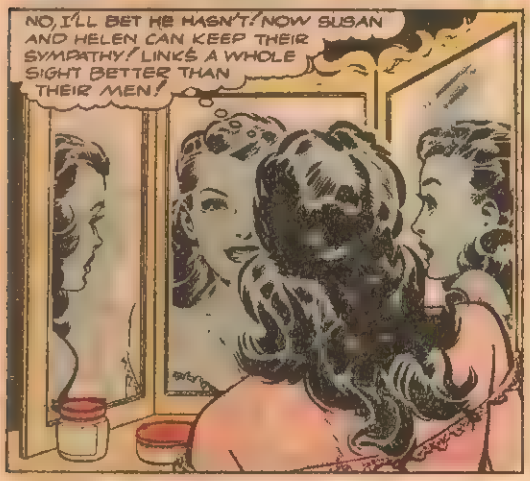

THERE WAS NO MOCKERY IN THIS STRANGER'S VOICE, ONLY SYMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING, AND HIS SLOW SMILE TOLD KATIE HE'D LIKE TO BE FRIENDS. SHE MET HIS EYES AND FOUND THEM GRAY, STEADY AND FULL OF ADMIRATION. SHE FLUSHED AND TURNED TO HER HORSE..
IT.. IT'S NOTHING IMPORTANT. I'VE GOT TO GET BACK TO THE RANCH NOW, AND SINCE I'VE GOT TO PICK UP SOMETHING IN TOWN FIRST, I'D BETTER GET ALONG.
MIND IF I RIDE ALONG, MAM? MAYBE YOU COULD RECOMMEND A DECENT HOTEL OR BOARDING-HOUSE WHERE I COULD STAY A SPELL. I'VE JUST ARRIVED ON BUSINESS.

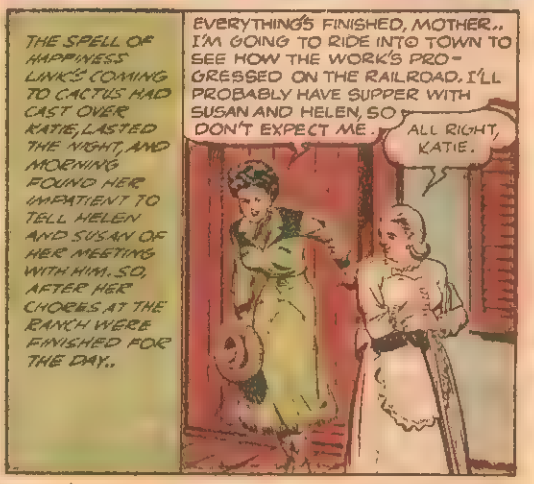

YOU'LL FIND GOOD BEDS AND VERY GOOD FOOD AT MA KETCHIN'S MISTER.. MISTER..?
CALHOUN. ONLY THAT MISTER BUSINESS MAKES IT KIND OF COLD-LIKE. I LIKE MY FRIENDS TO CALL ME, LINK, AND I'M HOPING YOU AND I ARE GOING TO BE FRIENDS, GOOD FRIENDS

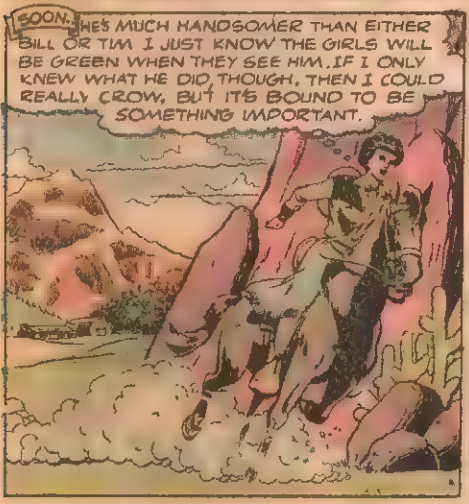
I HOPE SO, TOO, LINK. MY NAME'S [illegible] AMES. MY FOLKS [illegible] THE K.A RANCE OUTSIDE [illegible] TOWN.
I GOT A GLIMPSE OF CACTUS ON THE TRAIL BEFORE IT DIPPED INTO THAT GLEN BACK THERE, AND DIDN'T FIGURE IT FOR MUCH. JUST ANOTHER COWTOWN, I THOUGHT. NOW I'VE [illegible] FEELING IT'S GOING TO BE DIFFER[illegible]

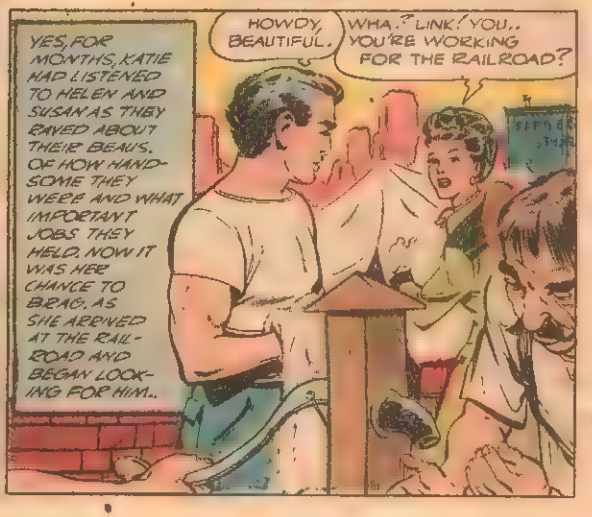

WHEN KATIE LEFT THE STRANGER AT MA KETCHIN'S BOARDING HOUSE AND RODE OUT OF TOWN TOWARD THE KA RANCH, SHE, TOO, THOUGHT THINGS WOULD BE DIFFERENT FROM NOW ON.
I LIKE HIM, AND I COULD TELL BY THE WAY HE LOOKED THAT HE LIKED ME. JUST WAIT TILL THE GIRLS SEE HIM! HERE ON BUSINESS, HE SAYS. I WONDER WHAT HE DOES? WHATEVER IT IS, IT MUST BE SOMETHING IMPORTANT.

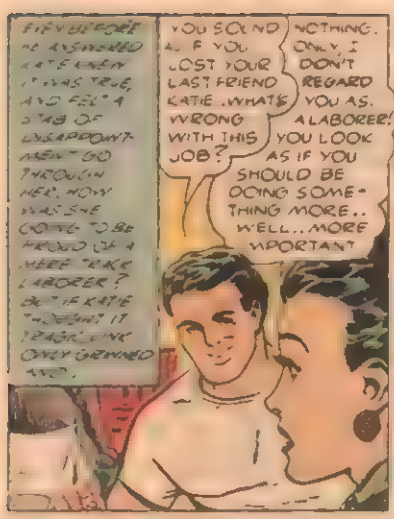

THAT NIGHT IN HER ROOM..
LINK..LINK CALHOUN.. MRS. LINK CALHOUN..I..
I SHOULDN'T BE THINKING LIKE THIS. IT ISN'T REALLY LADY-LIKE. BESIDES, HE'S PROBABLY FORGOTTEN ME ALREADY.


NO, I'LL BET HE HASN'T! NOW SUSAN AND HELEN CAN KEEP THEIR SYMPATHY! LINK'S A WHOLE SIGHT BETTER THAN THEIR MEN!


THE SPELL OF HAPPINESS LINK'S COMING TO CACTUS HAD CAST OVER KATIE, LASTED THE NIGHT, AND MORNING FOUND HER IMPATIENT TO TELL HELEN AND SUSAN OF HER MEETING WITH HIM. SO, AFTER HER CHORES AT THE RANCH WERE FINISHED FOR THE DAY..
EVERYTHING'S FINISHED, MOTHER.. I'M GOING TO RIDE INTO TOWN TO SEE HOW THE WORK'S PROGRESSED ON THE RAILROAD. I'LL PROBABLY HAVE SUPPER WITH SUSAN AND HELEN, SO DON'T EXPECT ME.
ALL RIGHT, KATIE.


SOON. HE'S MUCH HANDSOMER THAN EITHER BILL OR TIM. I JUST KNOW THE GIRLS WILL BE GREEN WHEN THEY SEE HIM. IF I ONLY KNEW WHAT HE DID, THOUGH. THEN I COULD REALLY CROW, BUT IT'S BOUND TO BE SOMETHING IMPORTANT.

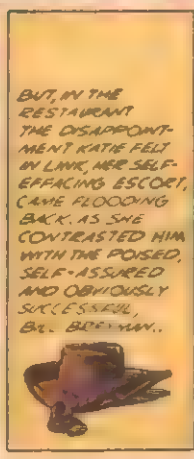

YES, FOR MONTHS, KATIE HAD LISTENED TO HELEN AND SUSAN AS THEY RAVED ABOUT THEIR BEAUS. OF HOW HANDSOME THEY WERE AND WHAT IMPORTANT JOBS THEY HELD. NOW IT WAS HER CHANCE TO BRAG, AS SHE ARRIVED AT THE RAILROAD AND BEGAN LOOKING FOR HIM..
HOWDY, BEAUTIFUL.
WHA.? LINK! YOU.. YOU'RE WORKING FOR THE RAILROAD?


FIFTY BEFORE HE ANSWERED KATIE KNEW IT WAS TRUE, AND FELT A STAB OF DISAPPOINTMENT GO THROUGH HER. NOW WAS SHE GOING TO BE PROUD OF A MERE "RAIL LABORER"? BUT IF KATIE THOUGHT IT TRACK LINK ONLY GRINNED AND.
YOU SOUND AS IF YOU LOST YOUR LAST FRIEND KATIE. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS JOB?
NOTHING. ONLY, I DON'T REGARD YOU AS A LABORER! YOU LOOK AS IF YOU SHOULD BE DOING SOMETHING MORE.. WELL.. MORE IMPORTANT

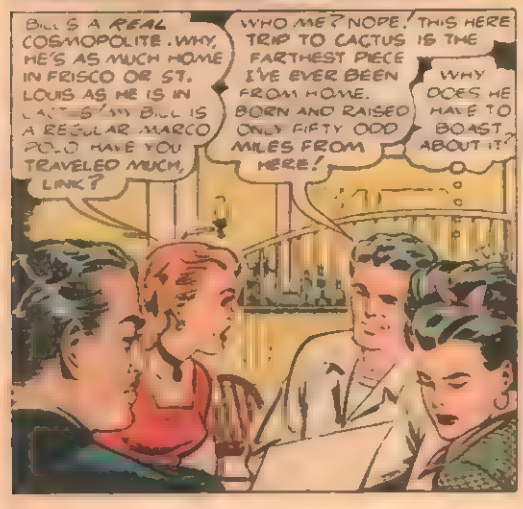
A MAN'S GOT TO CRAWL BEFORE HE WALKS, AND EAT BEFORE HE CRAWLS. THIS JOB TAKES CARE OF THE EATING PROBLEM. C'MON. I'LL WALK YOU TO TOWN
WELL.. I. ALL RIGHT.

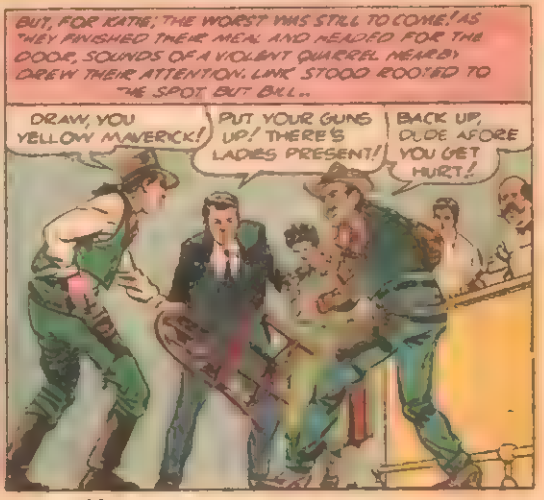
LINK'S LONG STRIDE AND EASY-GOING GRIN BRUSHED ASIDE KATIE'S DISAPPOINTMENT AND WHEN THEY MET BILL AND HELEN, AND KATIE SAW THE SURPRISE IN THE OTHER GIRL'S EYES, HER HEART SANG WITH GLADNESS..
HI KATE.. WELL, WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN HIDING EM?
LINK'S A NEW-COMER IN TOWN. LINK, MEET HELEN AND BILL.

GLAD TO MEET YOU, LINK..
BILL AND I WERE JUST GOING TO THE GOLDEN DEER FOR SUPPER. WHY DON'T YOU TWO JOIN US?
THAT SOUNDS FINE TO ME.
HOTEL

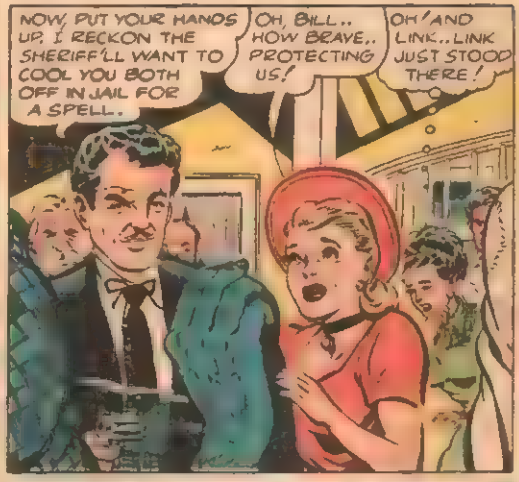

BUT, IN THE RESTAURANT THE DISAPPOINTMENT KATIE FELT IN LINK, HER SELF-EFFACING ESCORT, CAME FLOODING BACK. AS SHE CONTRASTED HIM WITH THE POISED, SELF-ASSURED AND OBVIOUSLY SUCCESSFUL, BILL BROWN..

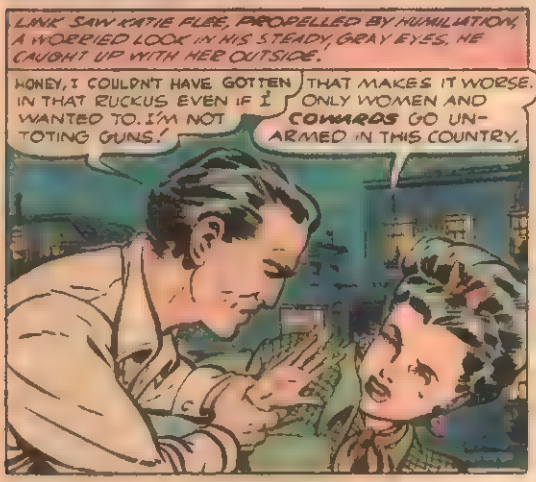
PERHAPS LINK WOULD LIKE TO ORDER FOR HIMSELF AND KATIE BILL.
NOT ME! I'M NO HAND WITH FANCY FOOD. CHOW IS CHOW. YOU ORDER UP FOR US BILL.
GLAD TO, LINK. MENUS ARE CONFUSING IF YOU DON'T KNOW YOUR WAY AROUND.


BILL'S A REAL COSMOPOLITE. WHY, HE'S AS MUCH HOME IN FRISCO OR ST. LOUIS AS HE IS IN LAS VEGAS! BILL IS A REGULAR MARCO POLO. HAVE YOU TRAVELED MUCH, LINK?
WHO ME? NOPE! THIS HERE TRIP TO CACTUS IS THE FARTHEST PIECE I'VE EVER BEEN FROM HOME. BORN AND RAISED ONLY FIFTY ODD MILES FROM HERE!
WHY DOES HE HAVE TO BOAST ABOUT IT?

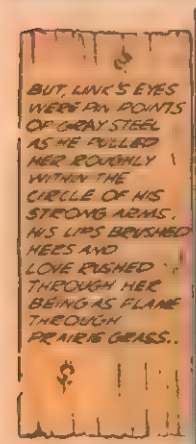

BUT, FOR KATIE, THE WORST WAS STILL TO COME! AS THEY FINISHED THEIR MEAL AND HEADED FOR THE DOOR, SOUNDS OF A VIOLENT QUARREL NEARBY DREW THEIR ATTENTION. LINK STOOD ROOTED TO THE SPOT BUT BILL..
DRAW, YOU YELLOW MAVERICK!
PUT YOUR GUNS UP! THERE'S LADIES PRESENT!
BACK UP, DUDE AFORE YOU GET HURT!

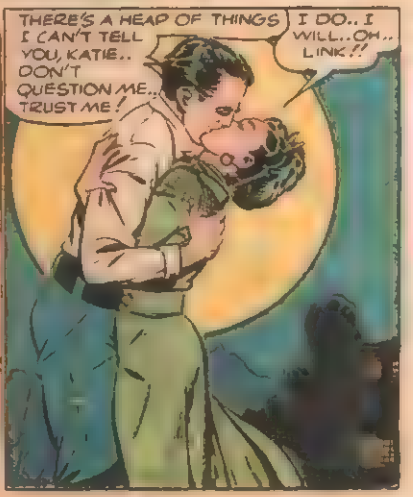
BILL'S EYES NARROWED, AND HIS HAND MOVED LIKE GREASED LIGHTNING.. HIS GUN WHIPPED OUT OF HIS HOLSTER AND..
HEY!
I DO SOME SHOOTING, TOO!


NOW, PUT YOUR HANDS UP. I RECKON THE SHERIFF'LL WANT TO COOL YOU BOTH OFF IN JAIL FOR A SPELL..
OH, BILL.. HOW BRAVE.. PROTECTING US!
OH! AND LINK.. LINK JUST STOOD THERE!


LINK SAW KATIE FLEE, PROPELLED BY HUMILIATION, A WORRIED LOOK IN HIS STEADY, GRAY EYES. HE CAUGHT UP WITH HER OUTSIDE.
HONEY, I COULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN IN THAT RUCKUS EVEN IF I WANTED TO. I'M NOT TOTING GUNS!
THAT MAKES IT WORSE. ONLY WOMEN AND COWARDS GO UNARMED IN THIS COUNTRY.

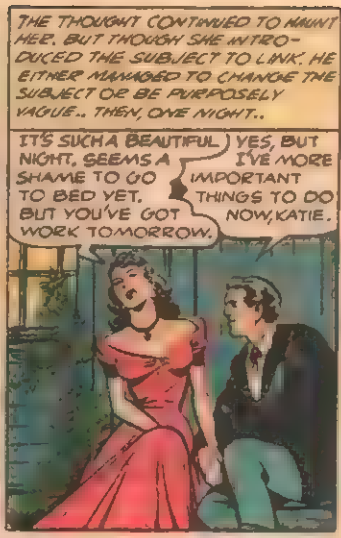
COWARD? YOU KNOW THAT ISN'T TRUE!
LINK, PLEASE.. DON'T MAKE IT WORSE..


BUT, LINK'S EYES WERE PIN POINTS OF GRAY STEEL AS HE PULLED HER ROUGHLY WITHIN THE CIRCLE OF HIS STRONG ARMS. HIS LIPS BRUSHED HERS AND LOVE RUSHED THROUGH HER BEING AS FLAME THROUGH PRAIRIE GRASS..

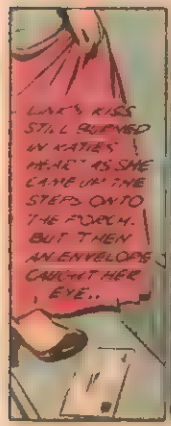

THERE'S A HEAP OF THINGS I CAN'T TELL YOU, KATIE.. DON'T QUESTION ME.. TRUST ME!
I DO.. I WILL.. OH.. LINK!!

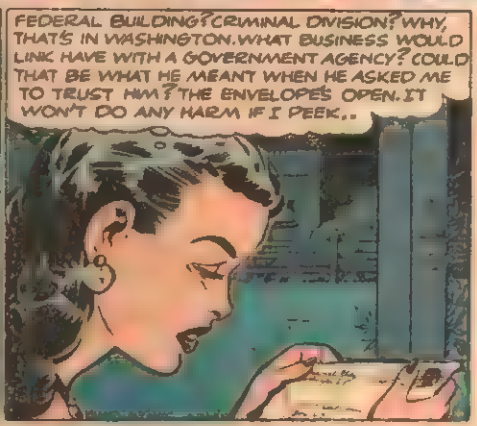
KATIE, I RECKON I'M THE LUCKIEST MAN IN CACTUS.
AND I'M THE LUCKIEST GIRL! AND I JUST KNOW THERE'LL COME A DAY WHEN YOU'LL SHOW BILL BREYMAN WHAT REAL SUCCESS AND IMPORTANCE IS.

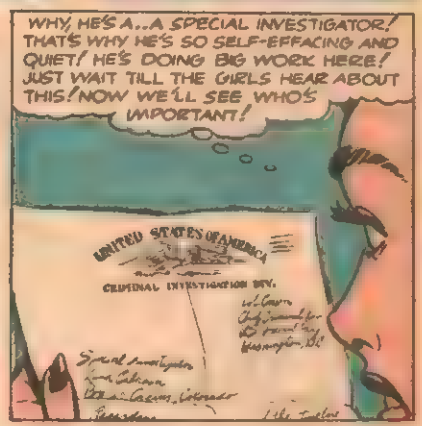
THAT NIGHT, KATIE LAY AWAKE IN HER ROOM, DREAMING OF LINK AND A GOLDEN FUTURE TOGETHER. THEN A PHRASE SPOKEN BY HIM THAT NIGHT CAME BACK TO HER AND SHE SAT BOLD UPRIGHT IN BED..
HE ASKED ME TO TRUST HIM. I WONDER WHAT HE MEANT BY THAT? IT COULD MEAN NOTHING, AND THEN AGAIN.. I WONDER?

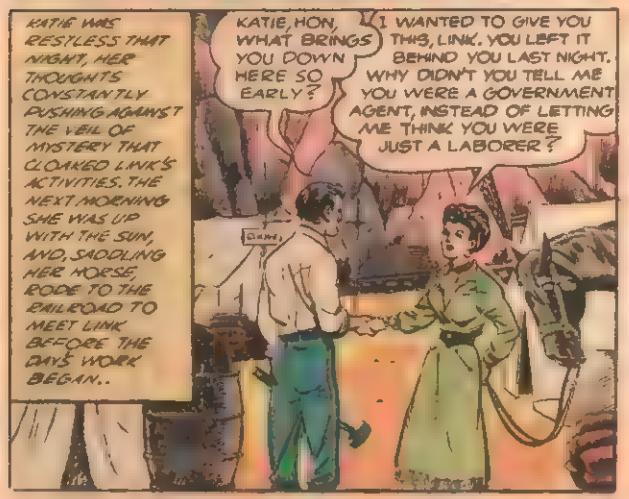

THE THOUGHT CONTINUED TO HAUNT HER. BUT THOUGH SHE INTRODUCED THE SUBJECT TO LINK, HE EITHER MANAGED TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT OR BE PURPOSELY VAGUE.. THEN, ONE NIGHT..
IT'S SUCH A BEAUTIFUL NIGHT. SEEMS A SHAME TO GO TO BED YET. BUT YOU'VE GOT WORK TOMORROW.
YES, BUT I'VE MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO DO NOW, KATIE.

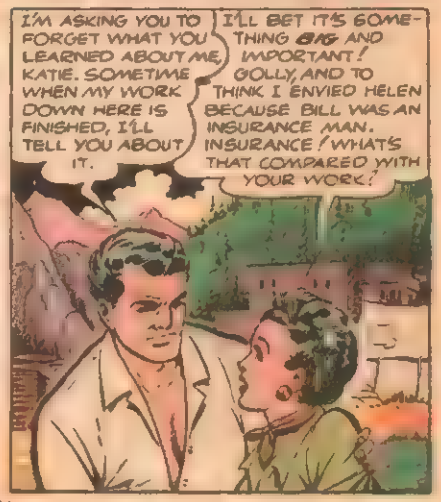
KATIE..
LINK!!


LINK'S KISS STILL BURNED IN KATIE'S HEART AS SHE CAME UP THE STEPS ONTO THE PORCH. BUT THEN AN ENVELOPE CAUGHT HER EYE..

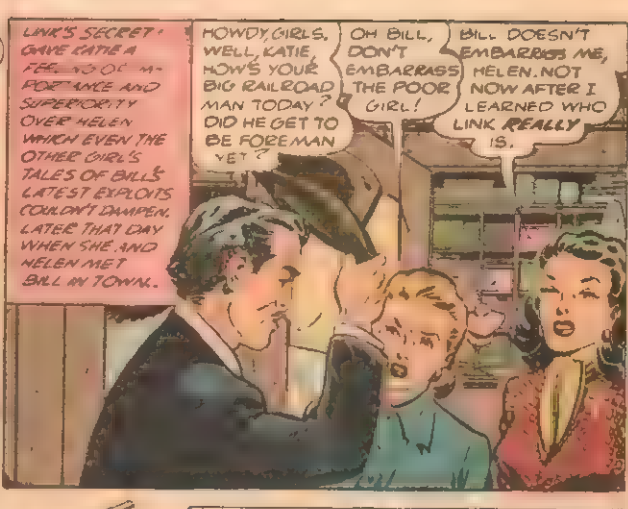

FEDERAL BUILDING? CRIMINAL DIVISION? WHY, THAT'S IN WASHINGTON. WHAT BUSINESS WOULD LINK HAVE WITH A GOVERNMENT AGENCY? COULD THAT BE WHAT HE MEANT WHEN HE ASKED ME TO TRUST HIM? THE ENVELOPE'S OPEN. IT WON'T DO ANY HARM IF I PEEK..


WHY, HE'S A.. A SPECIAL INVESTIGATOR! THAT'S WHY HE'S SO SELF-EFFACING AND QUIET! HE'S DOING BIG WORK HERE! JUST WAIT TILL THE GIRLS HEAR ABOUT THIS! NOW WE'LL SEE WHO'S IMPORTANT!
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION DIV.

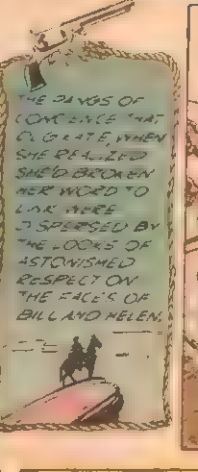

KATIE WAS RESTLESS THAT NIGHT, HER THOUGHTS CONSTANTLY PUSHING AGAINST THE VEIL OF MYSTERY THAT CLOAKED LINK'S ACTIVITIES. THE NEXT MORNING SHE WAS UP WITH THE SUN, AND, SADDLING HER HORSE, RODE TO THE RAILROAD TO MEET LINK BEFORE THE DAY'S WORK BEGAN..
KATIE, HON, WHAT BRINGS YOU DOWN HERE SO EARLY?
I WANTED TO GIVE YOU THIS, LINK. YOU LEFT IT BEHIND YOU LAST NIGHT. WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME YOU WERE A GOVERNMENT AGENT, INSTEAD OF LETTING ME THINK YOU WERE JUST A LABORER?


I'M ASKING YOU TO FORGET WHAT YOU LEARNED ABOUT ME, KATIE. SOMETIME WHEN MY WORK DOWN HERE IS FINISHED, I'LL TELL YOU ABOUT IT.
I'LL BET IT'S SOMETHING BIG AND IMPORTANT! GOLLY, AND TO THINK I ENVIED HELEN BECAUSE BILL WAS AN INSURANCE MAN. INSURANCE! WHAT'S THAT COMPARED WITH YOUR WORK!

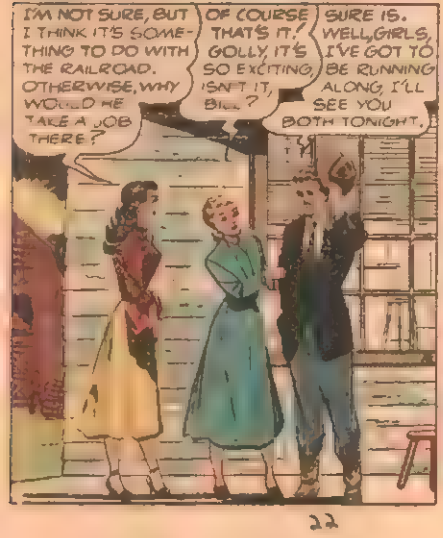
THAT WHISTLE MEANS ME.! I'VE GOT A COUPLE OF THINGS TO DO BEFORE I MEET YOU TONIGHT, SO I'LL BE A LITTLE LATE. REMEMBER, NOTHING ABOUT MY WORK.
NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO TRUST ME. DON'T FORGET HELEN'S TONIGHT.


LINK'S SECRET GAVE KATIE A FEELING OF IMPORTANCE AND SUPERIORITY OVER HELEN WHICH EVEN THE OTHER GIRL'S TALES OF BILL'S LATEST EXPLOITS COULDN'T DAMPEN. LATER THAT DAY WHEN SHE AND HELEN MET BILL IN TOWN.
HOWDY, GIRLS. WELL, KATIE, HOW'S YOUR BIG RAILROAD MAN TODAY? DID HE GET TO BE FOREMAN YET?
OH BILL, DON'T EMBARRASS THE POOR GIRL!
BILL DOESN'T EMBARRASS ME, HELEN. NOT NOW AFTER I LEARNED WHO LINK REALLY IS.

AH, MYSTERY! DON'T TELL US YOU'VE DISCOVERED THAT LINK ISN'T A SECTION HAND AFTER ALL, BUT REALLY THE RAILROAD PRESIDENT IN DISGUISE?
IF YOU MUST KNOW LINK'S A GOVERNMENT AGENT WORKING ON A VERY IMPORTANT CASE!


THE DAYS OF CONCEALMENT THAT OCCURRED WHEN SHE REALIZED SHE'D BROKEN HER WORD TO LINK WERE DISPERSED BY THE LOOKS OF ASTONISHED RESPECT ON THE FACES OF BILL AND HELEN.

THAT REALLY IS NEWS! YES, KATIE, YOU'VE MADE ME SEE YOUR FRIEND, LINK, IN A NEW LIGHT!
BUT, PLEASE DON'T SPREAD IT AROUND!
OF COURSE NOT, DEAR. WHAT IS HE WORKING ON?


I'M NOT SURE, BUT I THINK IT'S SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE RAILROAD. OTHERWISE, WHY WOULD HE TAKE A JOB THERE?
OF COURSE THAT'S IT! GOLLY, IT'S SO EXCITING, ISN'T IT, BILL?
SURE IS. WELL, GIRLS, I'VE GOT TO BE RUNNING ALONG. I'LL SEE YOU BOTH TONIGHT.

KATIE RETURNED TO THE RANCH, BUT, EARLY THAT EVENING SHE WAS BACK IN TOWN DRIVING TOWARDS HELEN'S HOUSE WHERE LINK WAS TO PICK HER UP SUDDENLY.
THERE'S LINK! HE DOESN'T LOOK AS IF HE'S HEADED FOR HELEN'S, EITHER, AND HE'S CARRYING A GUN! I'LL BET HE'S DOING SOME UNDERCOVER WORK. MAYBE IF I FOLLOW HIM I'LL GET A HINT OF JUST WHAT HE'S INVESTIGATING.

LEAVING HER CARRIAGE, KATIE FOLLOWED CLOSE BEHIND LINK AS HE STRODE OUT OF TOWN! SOME MINUTES LATER KATIE KNEW THEIR DESTINATION WAS REACHED WHEN LINK...

HE'S STOPPED TO POKE AROUND IN THE CLIFF ABOVE THE RAILROAD CUT. THEN, WHATEVER HE'S INVESTIGATING CENTERS AROUND THE RAILROAD ITSELF. HE'S THROUGH. I'D BETTER HIDE.

LINK WOULD BE POWERFUL MAD IF HE KNEW I FOLLOWED HIM. BUT I'M NOT REALLY DOING ANY HARM. HE'LL HAVE TO CHANGE HIS CLOTHES NOW BEFORE HE GOES TO HELEN'S. THAT GIVES ME TIME TO BEAT HIM THERE.

AFTER LINK PASSED HER, KATIE WENT BACK TO TOWN FOR HER CARRIAGE AND DROVE TO HELEN'S HOUSE. AS BILL HELPED HER FROM THE CARRIAGE...

YOU'RE MIGHTY LATE, KATIE. WE EXPECTED YOU AND LINK A HALF HOUR AGO.

YES, WHERE IS LINK, ANYWAY? WE THOUGHT YOU'D COME TOGETHER.

HE HAD SOME BUSINESS TO ATTEND TO FIRST.

YOU MEAN GOVERNMENT BUSINESS, DON'T YOU? DON'T BE SO MYSTERIOUS, KATIE, WE'RE ALL FRIENDS HERE. BESIDES, IT CAN'T BE VERY IMPORTANT IF IT HAS TO DO WITH CACTUS. NOTHING EVER HAPPENS IN THIS TOWN.

KATIE FLUSHED HOTLY AT BILL'S BELITTLING COMMENT, AND FAILED TO CHECK THE FLOOD OF WORDS THAT RUSHED IMPULSIVELY PAST HER LIPS.

THAT'S HOW LITTLE YOU KNOW! SOMETHING BIG IS GOING TO HAPPEN ON THE RAILROAD, MAYBE WITHIN A FEW DAYS! I KNOW, BECAUSE I FOLLOWED LINK TONIGHT AND SAW HIM UNCOVERING SOME HOLES IN THE CUT THAT LOOKED LIKE EXPLOSIVE TRAPS.

HONEST? GOSH, D'YOU SUPPOSE SOMEONE'S GOING TO BLOW UP THE RAILROAD?

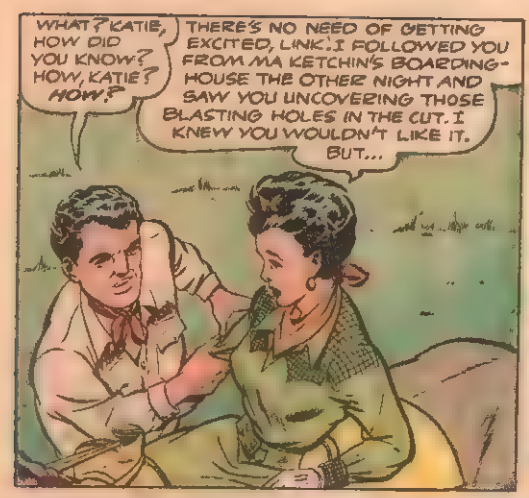
HERE COMES LINK. WE'D BETTER STOP TALKING ABOUT THIS UNTIL LATER.

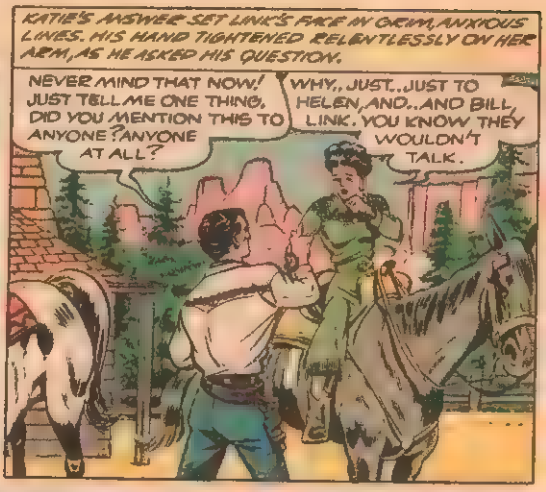
YES, WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T TELL LINK I'VE BEEN TALKING HE'D BE FURIOUS.

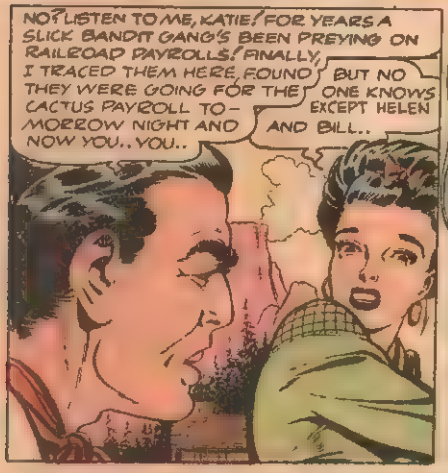
SEVERAL DAYS LATER...

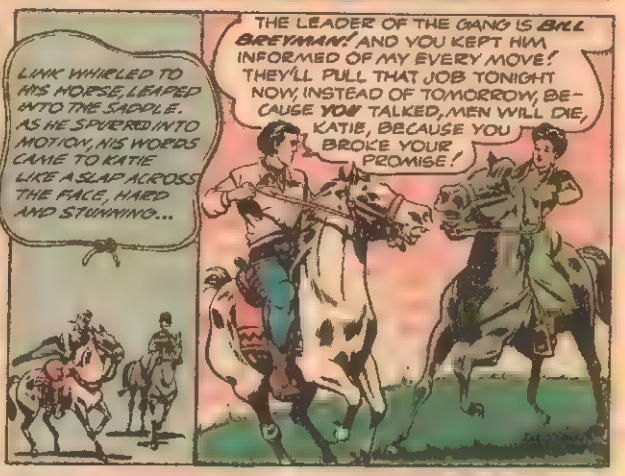
ABOUT OUR DATE TOMORROW NIGHT, KATIE. I WON'T BE ABLE TO MAKE IT. I'VE GOT A POWERFUL IMPORTANT JOB ON. IF ALL GOES WELL I'LL HAVE A LONG VACATION TO SPEND WITH YOU.

BE CAREFUL, LINK. I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING TOMORROW NIGHT! IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH WRECKING THE RAILROAD, HASN'T IT?

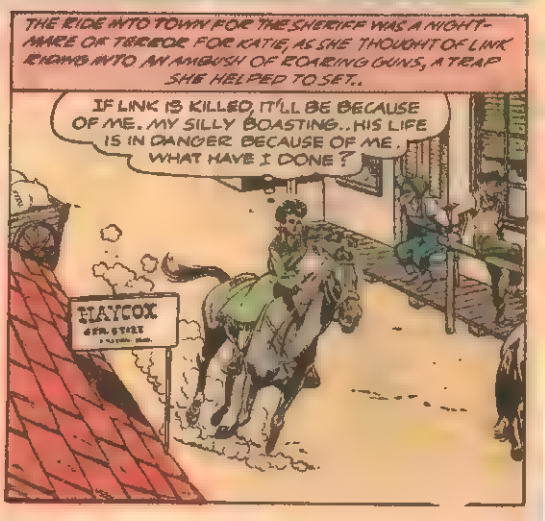

WHAT? KATIE, HOW DID YOU KNOW? HOW, KATIE? HOW?
THERE'S NO NEED OF GETTING EXCITED, LINK. I FOLLOWED YOU FROM MA KETCHIN'S BOARDING-HOUSE THE OTHER NIGHT AND SAW YOU UNCOVERING THOSE BLASTING HOLES IN THE CUT. I KNEW YOU WOULDN'T LIKE IT. BUT...


KATIE'S ANSWER SET LINK'S FACE IN GRIM, ANXIOUS LINES. HIS HAND TIGHTENED RELENTLESSLY ON HER ARM, AS HE ASKED HIS QUESTION.
NEVER MIND THAT NOW! JUST TELL ME ONE THING, DID YOU MENTION THIS TO ANYONE? ANYONE AT ALL?
WHY, JUST..JUST TO HELEN, AND..AND BILL LINK. YOU KNOW THEY WOULDN'T TALK.


NO? LISTEN TO ME, KATIE! FOR YEARS A SLICK BANDIT GANG'S BEEN PREYING ON RAILROAD PAYROLLS! FINALLY, I TRACED THEM HERE, FOUND THEY WERE GOING FOR THE CACTUS PAYROLL TOMORROW NIGHT AND NOW YOU..YOU..
BUT NO ONE KNOWS EXCEPT HELEN AND BILL..


LINK WHEELED TO HIS HORSE, LEAPED INTO THE SADDLE. AS HE SPURRED INTO MOTION, HIS WORDS CAME TO KATIE LIKE A SLAP ACROSS THE FACE, HARD AND STUNNING...
THE LEADER OF THE GANG IS BILL BREYMAN! AND YOU KEPT HIM INFORMED OF MY EVERY MOVE! THEY'LL PULL THAT JOB TONIGHT NOW, INSTEAD OF TOMORROW, BECAUSE YOU TALKED, MEN WILL DIE, KATIE, BECAUSE YOU BROKE YOUR PROMISE!

I'VE GOT TO DO WHAT I CAN TO STOP THEM! YOU RIDE INTO TOWN FOR THE SHERIFF. TELL HIM, TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT INSTEAD, AND THAT HE SHOULD GET HIS MEN OUT TO THE RAILROAD AS FAST AS POSSIBLE.
LINK! DON'T GO ALONE! WAIT FOR THE SHERIFF! LINK! LINK!


THE RIDE INTO TOWN FOR THE SHERIFF WAS A NIGHTMARE OF TERROR FOR KATIE, AS SHE THOUGHT OF LINK RIDING INTO AN AMBUSH OF ROARING GUNS, A TRAP SHE HELPED TO SET..
IF LINK IS KILLED, IT'LL BE BECAUSE OF ME. MY SILLY BOASTING..HIS LIFE IS IN DANGER BECAUSE OF ME. WHAT HAVE I DONE?
HAYCOX

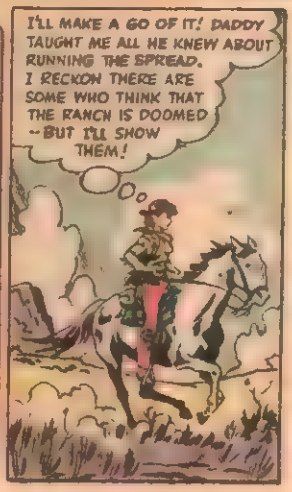
# A Stranger and His Dog

ROUNDUP TIME AGAIN, SUE. I RECKON IF YOUR PAPPY WAS ALIVE, HE'D BE OFF TO TOWN TO PICK UP SOME RANCH HANDS. BUT YOU'RE ONLY A YOUNG GIRL AND--!

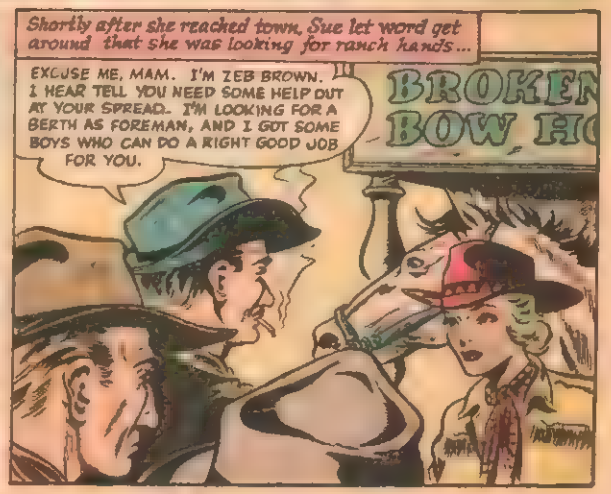
I MAY BE A YOUNG GIRL, NELLIE -- BUT I'M ALSO THE OWNER OF THE Q Z SPREAD-- SO I'M OFF TO TOWN TO DO WHAT MY FATHER WOULD DO -- GET ME SOME RANCH HANDS!

Her father's legacy dictated that Sue Lawrence take on the man-sized job of running a ranch -- a ranch that was the target for greedy eyes and itchy trigger fingers. And then a handsome stranger rode into her life, and she found herself with another legacy -- a legacy of love. But it was written in the cards that she had to make a choice -- and it wasn't until the roar of six-guns dissipated the fog of indecision that she realized there is no substitute for a kiss that touches the heart!

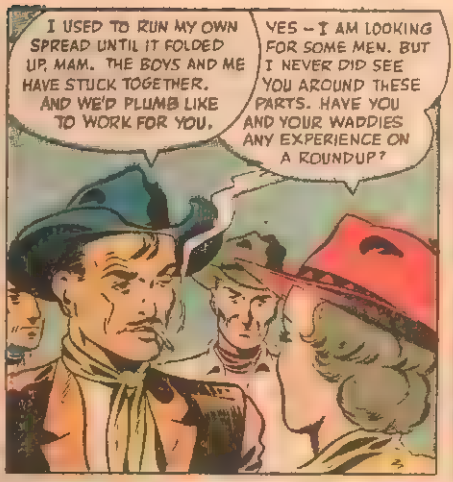
*As Sue spurred her horse toward town, she tried to forget the heavy responsibility that had fallen on her shoulders. The purple sagebrush on the wide prairie - the fleecy clouds above, and the wind stinging her beautiful face gave her a momentary feeling of exhilaration...*



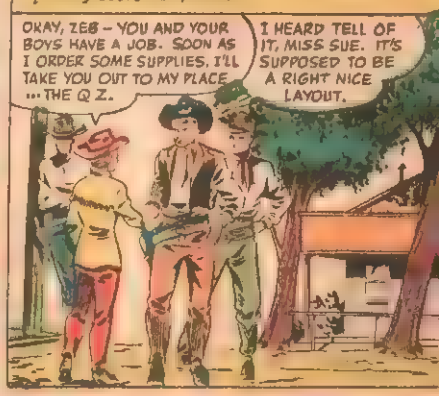

*Shortly after she reached town, Sue let word get around that she was looking for ranch hands...*



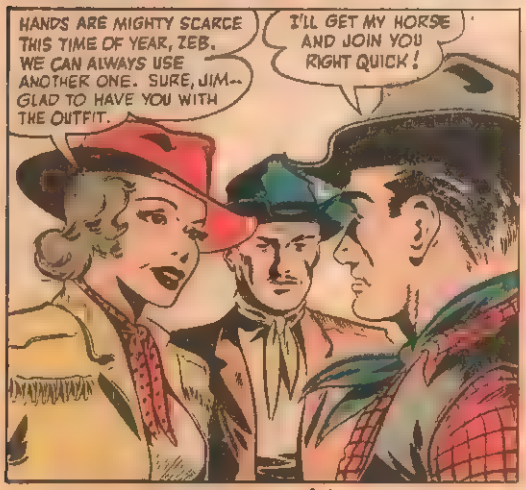
*There was something about Zeb Brown's confident smirk that bothered Sue. She instinctively felt repelled by his cocky manner, and the group of silent, staring men who watched her gave her the feeling of being hemmed in by poisonous rattlers...*

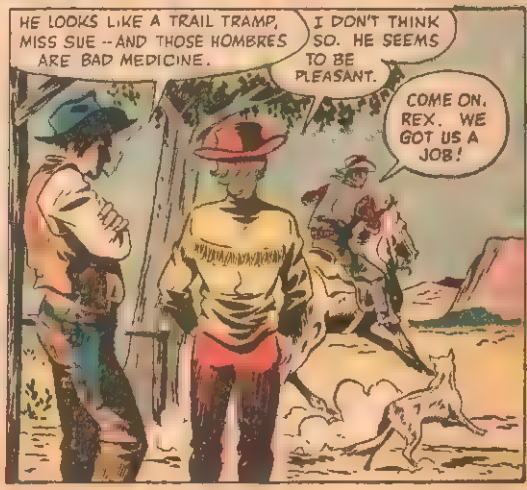



*Impatiently, Sue shrugged off her doubts. Experienced cowhands weren't easy to corral. By hiring Zeb and his riders, she could quickly solve her problem...*

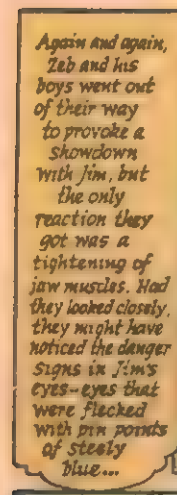


*The stranger's voice seemed to stir something deep within Sue. She found her heart fluttering in excitement when his blue, friendly eyes, framed in a handsome bronzed face, turned toward her...*

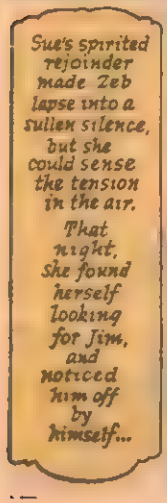


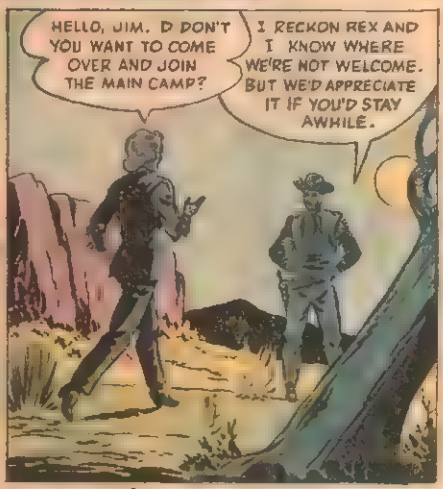



On reaching the ranch, Zeb made it clear to the hired hands that he was boss. Sue couldn't help noticing that Zeb reserved the hardest and toughest jobs for Jim. But Jim took it all without a whimper. And then, a few days later...
WE'RE RIDING OUT FOR THE ROUNDUP, MISS SUE. I'LL BE SENDING ONE OF MY BOYS BACK WITH REPORTS ON HOW THINGS ARE GOING.
THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY, ZEB. I'M GOING WITH YOU!
YOU? B-BUT, BEGGING YOUR PARDON, MISS SUE--IT'S NO PLACE FOR A--A GIRL.
RECKON SUE'S RIGHT. SEEMS LIKE A MIGHTY GOOD IDEA TO ME. SHE CAN SEE HOW HER HERD IS SHAPING UP.
In the roundup days that followed, she found it hard to keep the glint of admiration out of her eyes as she saw Jim doing the work of two men --saw his easy grace in the saddle, as if he were molded to it...
I'M GLAD I DIDN'T LET ZEB TALK ME OUT OF HIRING HIM.
HE'S EASILY THE BEST HAND IN THE OUTFIT!
But it wasn't all work for Sue and Jim. There were nights when they would huddle near the welcoming warmth of a fire—not saying much--but letting their eyes tell of the feeling that was growing between them...
IT'S NOT ONLY THAT HE'S SO HANDSOME, BUT HE'S SOMEONE TO TALK TO--LISTEN TO—! JIM--I WONDER IF YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE COME TO MEAN TO ME!?
But Jim had something else to contend with. The hostility of Zeb and his boys who sensed Sue's feeling toward him...
LISTEN, HOMBRE, YOU WERE HIRED TO DO SOME WORK ON THIS ROUNDUP, NOT MAKE SHEEP EYES AT THE LADY BOSS. NOW YOU START PULLING YOUR WEIGHT OR...!
I RECKON I'M DOING MY SHARE!
HE IS, ZEB. NOW STOP THIS QUARRELLING ALL THE TIME!



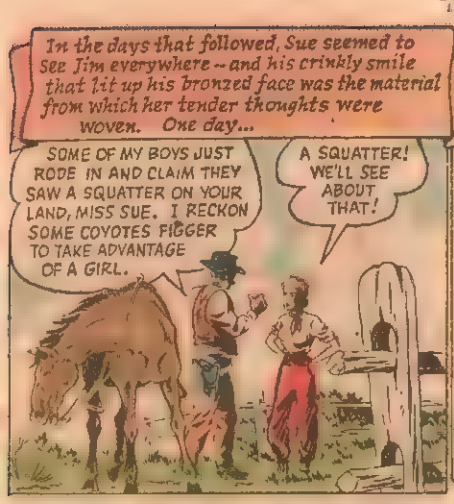
Jim had lashed out with the speed of a cougar, and the quivering body of his assailant made the others stare in surprise for a long moment. Only the ominous growling of Rex broke the silence, when Zeb turned to Sue with a snarl...

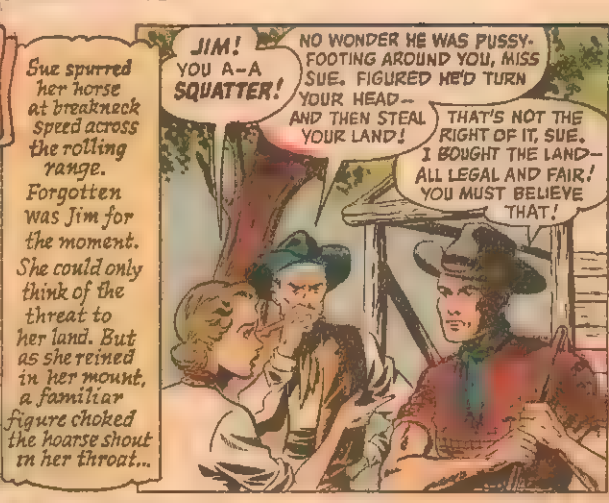


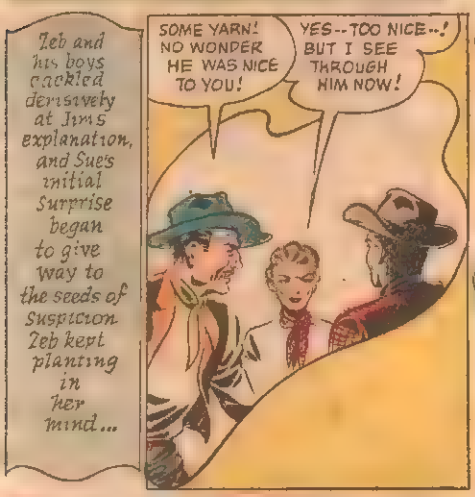



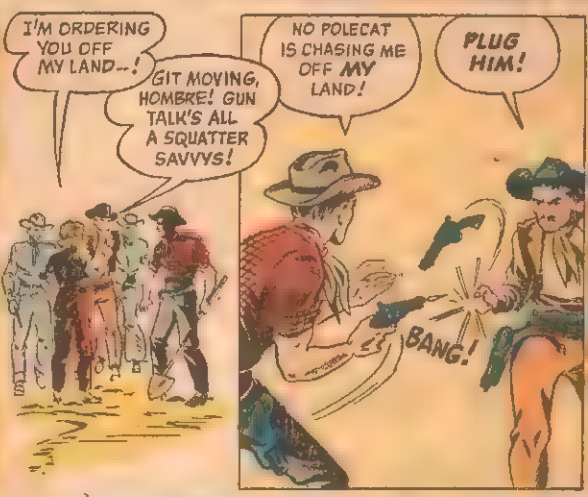
Sue was suddenly aware of the pent-up emotion that seemed to shake Jim's body like a twig in a desert storm. Her own heart froze with apprehension as his drawn face turned toward her...
THOSE JASPERS SEEM TO RESENT MY STAYING ON HERE, SUE. MAYBE IT WOULD BE BEST FOR YOU IF I CLEARED OUT.
NO, JIM-- NO! I NEED YOU--!
The girl's anguished protest revealed the deep-rooted emotion she felt, and Jim gently drew her toward him--and---
I LOVE YOU, SUE--! YOU'RE SOMETHING I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR ALONG ENDLESS TRAILS!
AND I LOVE YOU, JIM-- SO VERY MUCH!
Jim knew he could never leave now--even though the tension and ominous grumbling of Zeb and his men hinted at an early showdown. And then it happened!...
GET OUT OF MY WAY, YOU MANGY --!
AGRRRRR!
YIPE! HALP!
NO, REX! NO! LET GO!
GRRR!
THE BLASTED MUTT! I'LL KILL HIM!
DON'T---!
YOU'VE BEEN ASKING FOR TROUBLE -- NOW YOU GOT IT!
BANG!

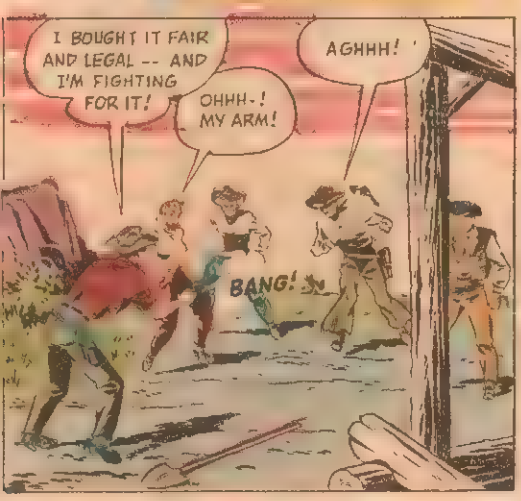
The lightning draw had left them all gasping in dismay their eyes tinged with reluctant respect ...
I'M SLINGING LEAD FOR KEEPS AT THE NEXT VARMINT WHO TRIES TO GUN REX!
STOP IT --! STOP! I-- I WON'T HAVE THIS WRANGLING GOING ON!
I WARNED YOU THERE'D BE TROUBLE WITH HIM AROUND. HE'S JUST SPOILING TO GET PLUGGED.
EITHER YOU KEEP YOUR BOYS IN LINE, ZEB -- OR I GET A NEW OUTFIT. NOW LET'S GET ON WITH THIS ROUNDUP.
At long last, the round-up was over, and they drifted back to the ranch --but not all of them were there to stay...
WHERE -- WHERE ARE YOU GOING, JIM?
I'M PULLING OUT, SUE. STAYING ON IS ONLY GOING TO MEAN MORE TROUBLE FOR YOU. I DON'T WANT THAT!
B BUT WHERE WILL YOU GO?
I BOUGHT ME A PIECE OF LAND NOT FAR FROM HERE. I AIM TO START MY OWN SPREAD. YOU'LL BE SEEING ME!
But not even the reassuring words of Jim could ease the cold fear that clutched at her heart like a wintry prairie wind. How could she let this lean, hard son of the west ride out of her life now?
I STARTED TO BUILD A HOUSE ON MY PIECE, SUE -- BUT NOW I KNOW WHO THAT HOUSE IS GOING TO BE FOR. I'LL BE BACK TO SHOW IT TO YOU, DARLING.
OH, JIM!
GOODBYE FOR A LITTLE WHILE, SUE --!
SOB!
She saw him ride off with tears stinging her eyes and even before he was out of sight Sue knew the ranch would never be the same without him ...
GOODBYE -- MY LOVE!

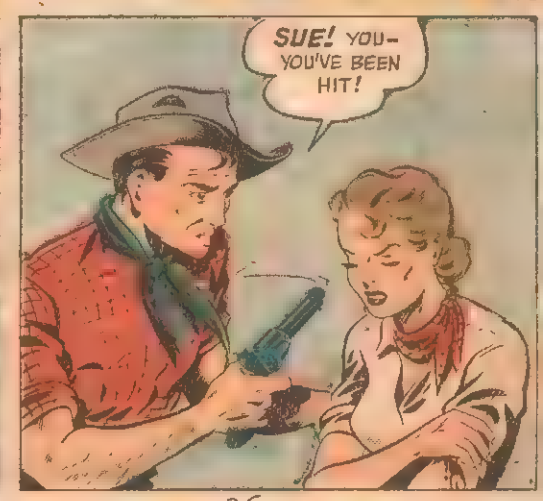

In the days that followed, Sue seemed to see Jim everywhere -- and his crinkly smile that lit up his bronzed face was the material from which her tender thoughts were woven. One day...
SOME OF MY BOYS JUST RODE IN AND CLAIM THEY SAW A SQUATTER ON YOUR LAND, MISS SUE. I RECKON SOME COYOTES FIGGER TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A GIRL.
A SQUATTER! WE'LL SEE ABOUT THAT!


Sue spurred her horse at breakneck speed across the rolling range. Forgotten was Jim for the moment. She could only think of the threat to her land. But as she reined in her mount, a familiar figure choked the hoarse shout in her throat...
JIM! YOU A-A SQUATTER!
NO WONDER HE WAS PUSSY-FOOTING AROUND YOU, MISS SUE. FIGURED HE'D TURN YOUR HEAD-- AND THEN STEAL YOUR LAND!
THAT'S NOT THE RIGHT OF IT, SUE. I BOUGHT THE LAND-- ALL LEGAL AND FAIR! YOU MUST BELIEVE THAT!


Zeb and his boys cackled derisively at Jim's explanation, and Sue's initial surprise began to give way to the seeds of suspicion Zeb kept planting in her mind...
SOME YARN! NO WONDER HE WAS NICE TO YOU!
YES--TOO NICE--! BUT I SEE THROUGH HIM NOW!


I'M ORDERING YOU OFF MY LAND--!
GIT MOVING, HOMBRE! GUN TALK'S ALL A SQUATTER SAVVYS!
NO POLECAT IS CHASING ME OFF MY LAND!
PLUG HIM!
BANG!


I BOUGHT IT FAIR AND LEGAL -- AND I'M FIGHTING FOR IT!
OHHH-! MY ARM!
AGHHH!
BANG!


SUE! YOU-- YOU'VE BEEN HIT!

There was a look of real concern on Jim's face as he tenderly touched Sue's grazed arm, but the girl's real hurt was in her heart! She was convinced that he had made a fool of her, and she lashed out at him.

LET ME ALONE! TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF ME!

SLAP!

And...

I'M GIVING YOU UNTIL TOMORROW TO BE OFF MY LAND, OR SURE AS SHOOTING, WE'LL RUN YOU OFF!

YOU'RE DEAD WRONG, SUE. WHY DON'T YOU RIDE INTO TOWN AND CHECK MY CLAIM! IT'S NOT YOUR LAND! I'D NEVER TAKE IT IF..!

But Sue let Jim's words hang in mid-air as she reined her horse and galloped off at a mad pace to hide the heartbreak in her soul...

ME AND THE BOYS WILL FINISH HIM TONIGHT ONCE AND FOR ALL!

TO-- TONIGHT?

I CHANGED MY MIND, ZEB! I DON'T WANT YOU AND THE BOYS TO BOTHER HIM TONIGHT. I'LL RIDE INTO TOWN TOMORROW AND CHECK HIS CLAIM. MAYBE HE --HE IS TELLING THE TRUTH!

WHA--!?

As they arrived at the ranch, Sue was suddenly aware of Zeb's new attitude – an attitude that stripped the pretense of respect he had maintained up to now...

I WASN'T READY TO MAKE MY MOVE, SISTER – BUT YOU CALLED THE TURN! YOU AIN'T RIDING NOWHERE TOMORROW! SURE – THAT'S HIS LAND --BUT I DIDN'T FIGGER ON YOU CHECKING IT. CLIMB OFF THERE!

LET ME GO!

I NEED THIS PLACE AS A HIDE-OUT FOR ME AND MY BOYS, AND I DON'T AIM TO HAVE YOU NOSING AROUND A LOT OF SHERIFFS SO THEY CAN START ASKING QUESTIONS. THERE'S TOO MANY HOMBRES GUNNING FOR NOTCH BAKER AND HIS MEN!

NOTCH BAKER--! YOU-YOU'RE ALL OUTLAWS!

SO YOU'VE HAD WIND OF US, TOO. WELL-- THERE'S ROPES WAITING FOR US – AND WE DON'T AIM TO WEAR THEM! WE'VE KIND OF GROWN FOND OF THIS SPREAD – AND WE'RE STAYING. TAKE HER INSIDE AND TIE HER UP. SEE THAT SHE DON'T MOVE OUT OF THE HOUSE!

THAT'S WHY YOU TRIED TO DRIVE JIM AWAY! YOU THOUGHT HE MIGHT GET SUSPICIOUS! WHAT A FOOL I'VE BEEN!

Late that night, Rex's warning growl instantly stirred Jim into tense alertness...
GRRRRR!
WHAT IS IT, BOY? WE GOT SOME UNEXPECTED COMPANY?
IT'S THOSE VARMINTS AGAIN. I FIGURED THEY'D BE BACK TO DO THEIR DIRTY WORK IN THE DARK. WELL -- WE'LL GIVE THEM A HOT RECEPTION, EH, REX?
As silent as the night itself, Zeb and his owlhooters slowly closed in on the cabin, on what they thought was an unsuspecting victim. Suddenly, flashes of gunfire stabbed the darkness...
HE'S SPOTTED US!
BANG! BANG!
GIT BACK TO THE HORSES! WE GOT TO MAKE OTHER PLANS!
BANG!
BANG!
THERE THEY GO! BUT I HAVE A HUNCH THOSE COYOTES WILL BE BACK! THEY SEEM POWERFUL ANXIOUS TO RUN ME OUT OF HERE! I JUST CAN'T UNDERSTAND SUE BEING A PART OF ALL THIS --!
The hunch was right. Zeb and his men did come back --again and again -- but always Jim's straight shooting and the alertness of his dog held them back!
THOSE SNEAKING POLECATS AREN'T SHOWING ANY PART OF THEIR HIDES FOR ME TO GET A BEAD ON!
BANG! BANG!
AIN'T NO USE, BOSS. IT'S GOING TO BE DAYLIGHT SOON AND WE JUST CAN'T GET CLOSE ENOUGH TO PLUG HIM!
THERE'S MORE THAN ONE WAY TO SKIN A CAT. TOMORROW, I'M SENDING ONE OF YOU DOWN TO TALK TO HIM AND HERE'S THE YARN WE'LL TELL HIM ---

The following day, one of Zeb's riders approached with a flag of truce, asking to speak to Jim...
THE GAL BOSS SENT ME! SHE CHECKED YOUR CLAIM AND FINDS THIS PIECE YOURS ALL LEGAL AND FAIR. SHE WANTS YOU TO COME TO HER RANCH – FOR AN APOLOGY.
ALL RIGHT, YOU SAID YOUR PIECE. NOW GIT! TELL HER I'LL BE COMING!
If any suspicions crossed Jim's mind, he impatiently shrugged them off. He wanted to believe that the girl who had come to mean so much to him had misjudged him. So, a few hours later, Jim rode up to the ranch and...
SUE!
YOU WALKED SMACK INTO IT, HOMBRE!
OHHHHH!
When the black cloud of oblivion finally lifted from Jim's mind, he found himself a prisoner – tied and gagged – with a gloating Zeb standing over them...
RIGHT NICE OF ME TO LET YOU LOVEBIRDS LOOK AT EACH OTHER. BUT NOT FOR LONG. I'VE TAKEN A HANKERIN' TO THIS SPREAD. THERE'S GOING TO BE AN ACCIDENT – WE'LL FIGGER JUST WHAT OUTSIDE!
I LOVE YOU, DARLING! IF I COULD ONLY TELL YOU THAT WITH MY OWN LIPS BEFORE I DIE!
I DON'T CARE ABOUT MYSELF, SUE – BUT –YOU–! AT LEAST I KNOW THAT YOU KNOW THE TRUTH NOW – IF I COULD BUT HOLD YOU IN MY ARMS ONCE MORE–!
Just then...
REX!
GOOD BOY, REX! QUICK! TAKE SUE'S KERCHIEF TO THE SHERIFF!
HER KERCHIEF TO THE SHERIFF!
HURRY! BRING HIM!

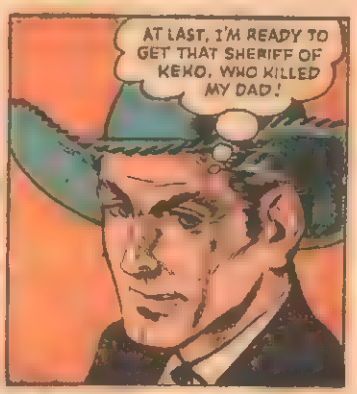
For a few seconds, the intelligent eyes of the dog regarded its master--as if reluctant to leave him. But Jim barked another command, and Rex tore off Sue's kerchief as Zeb and his gang reentered the room...
THE DOG! HE'S GETTING AWAY! GET HIM!
BANG! BANG!
HE GOT CLEAN AWAY, ZEB! I COULDN'T GET A BLASTED SHOT AT HIM.
DON'T MAKE NO DIFFERENCE! WE'RE FIXING THESE TWO NOW!
COURAGE, DARLING. THEY'LL CATCH UP TO THESE RATTLESNAKES SOME DAY!
A short time later, Jim and Sue were taken to a mountainous slope noted for its landslides. Both knew the end wasn't far off--but there was no dimming the love light that shone from their eyes... But then.
LET 'EM ROLL!
HOLD IT! ONE MOVE AND I'M LETTING DAYLIGHT THROUGH YOU!
I LOVE YOU, JIM! I'LL LOVE YOU THROUGH ALL ETERNITY!
THE SHERIFF!
YEP. WE FIGURED TROUBLE WHEN WE SAW SUE'S KERCHIEF!
Sue and Jim were soon untied and they confronted Zeb and his owlhoots!
EASY, BOY! THE SHERIFF IS GOING TO TAKE CARE OF THOSE VARMINTS!
D-DON'T LET TH-THAT DOG GET AT M-ME
And then they were alone--with Sue clinging to her love.
DARLING--CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?--
THAT LAND OF YOURS! I--I--DIDN'T KNOW!
IT'S NOT GOING TO BE MINE ALONE FOR LONG, SUE. WE'RE GOING TO BE PERMANENT PARTNERS! YOU AND ME--AND REX! FOREVER!

LOVE and COURTSHIP
The BRIDAL WREATH OF OLDEN TIMES CONSISTED OF EARS OF CORN.. SIGNIFYING PLENTY... FOR THE WEDDING COUPLE; THE ELABORATE WREATH WAS MADE BY THE BRIDE'S PARENTS, WEEKS IN ADVANCE OF THE MARRIAGE!
IN COLONIAL DAYS IN AMERICA, MAIDENS WHO OFTEN ACTED AS BRIDESMAIDS WERE ADVISED TO REFUSE IN THEIR OWN INTERESTS, BECAUSE OF THE PREVALENT SUPERSTITION THAT THREE TIMES A BRIDESMAID... NEVER A BRIDE!"
IT HAS LONG BEEN BELIEVED THAT IF A BRIDE, ON HER WEDDING DAY SEES HER BRIDEGROOM BEFORE HE CATCHES A GLIMPSE OF HER SHE WILL DOMINATE HIM ALL HER LIFE!
THE MARRIAGE CONTRACT IN PARTS OF LABRADOR PROVIDES THAT THE BRIDES PARENTS FURNISH THE NEWLYWEDS WITH ENOUGH FIREWOOD TO LAST FOR 2 YEARS AFTER THE WEDDING!
IN JEREZ SPAIN, A WOMAN HAD THE PORTRAIT OF HER HUSBAND TATTOOED ON HER TONGUE... TO ATONE FOR NAGGING HIM TO DEATH!

# VENGEANCE at MESA RIDGE

*The sun was like a giant pendulum swinging down behind the hills of Mesa Ridge, and each passing second throbbed with the heartbeat of deadly suspense. Soon, two guns would flash – and a man would die! But Tex Kinley knew that the love he cherished would be slain in that exchange of gunfire!*

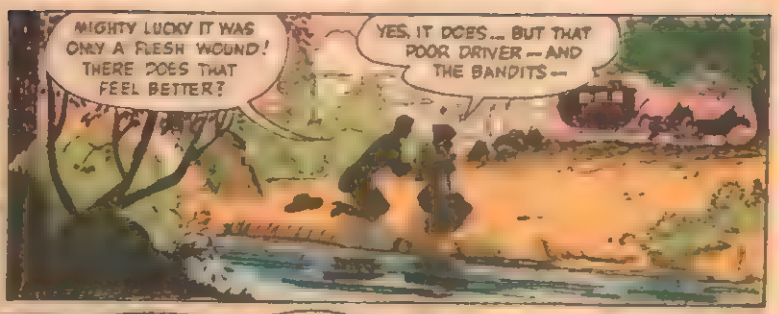
*Tex Kinley sat in the jostling stage coach that rolled across the rockstrewn road toward Keko. The tiny muscle in his jaw quivered as his tensed hand hovered almost involuntarily over his gun holster...*




*Ever since he was a kid, Tex had practised tirelessly to become an expert gunman with this mission of hate in mind. Even the radiantly beautiful girl who sat opposite him could not draw him from his ominous preoccupation...*

Suddenly, bursts of gunfire echoed across the open plains...
OUTLAWS! THEY MUST HAVE GOT WIND OF THIS BANK SHIPMENT!
GIDDAP, THERE!
PULL UP -- OR YOU'RE GONERS!
BANG! BANG!
A deadly fusillade caught the driver as Tex swung atop the plunging stage.
The hard-muscled cowboy became a dynamo of fury as he fanned his gun in a blur of blinding speed!
BANG! BANG! BANG!
I DON'T AIM TO HAVE MY TRIP INTERRUPTED!
UUH!
BANG! BANG! BANG!
WHUP, THERE! WHUP! YIPPEE! WE'VE GOT THEM LICKED!
With a strong and sure hand, Tex reined in the horses. Then he opened the coach door to find ...
THE GIRL! SHE'S BEEN HIT!
OHHHH -- I FAINTED! THE DRIVER -- WHAT HAPPENED?
HE'S A GONER, MAM! AND YOU SURE HAD ME WORRIED THERE FOR A MOMENT! I MEAN -- I THOUGHT --
VIOLENCE -- SHOOTING -- HOW I HATE IT! -- OH, MY SHOULDER!
HERE, LET'S GET OVER TO THE STREAM AND 'TEND TO THAT WOUND. RECKON I'D BETTER HELP YOU -- YOU STILL SEEM KIND OF SHAKY.

The soft fragrance of the girl was like the scent of prairie flowers, as Tex set her down with gentle strength beside the stream and applied his wetted handkerchief to the wound. An emotion far deeper than gratitude welled within her for his lean form of the saddle...

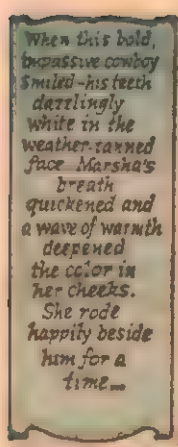


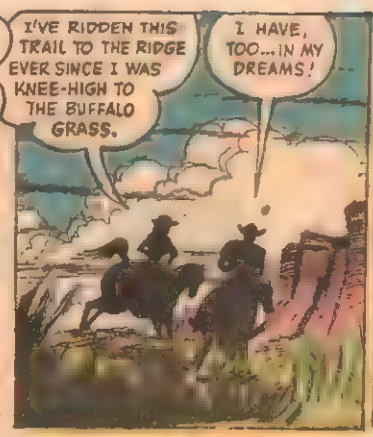
The stage entered Keko in the light of early evening. The tight-lipped Tex bid the girl farewell and headed in the direction of the hotel...

In the days that followed, Marsha Nixon saw Tex pass her by, wordlessly, many times.

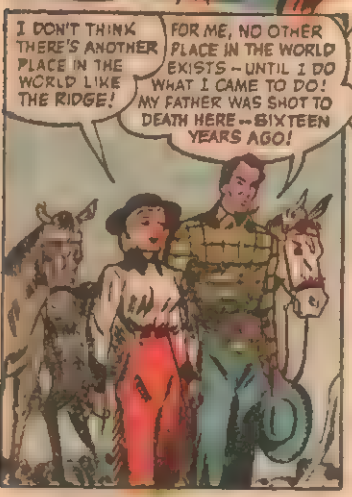
She saw the grim taut lines etched deeply in his face — and she wondered what terrible secret that expression masked.

Once he headed out of town — and impulsively, she followed after him...

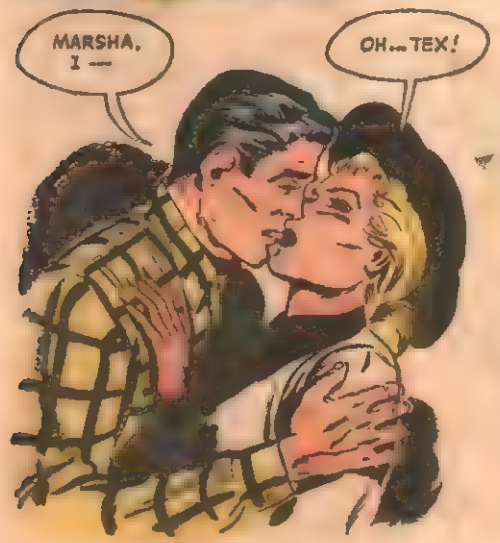


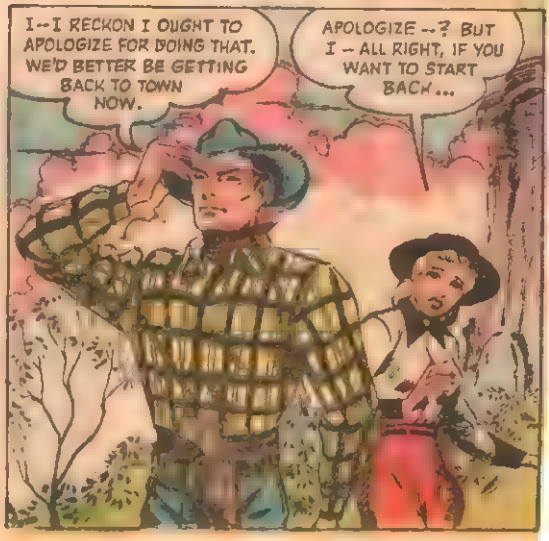



Mesa Ridge, a grim cliff of granite on a saucer-span of land as far as the eye could see! In the rays of the setting sun, the sand shone like a fine gold silt. Mesa Ridge! In the bygone, turbulent years, it had been used for the West's most notorious gun duels...



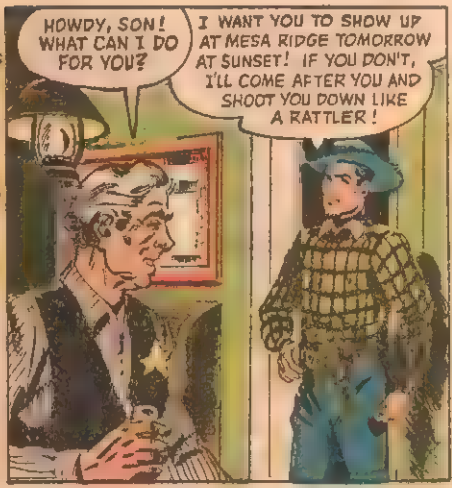
The venomous edge of his voice brought a tremor to Marsha's heart. She touched his hand in a gesture of tender compassion -- and something of what she felt communicated itself to the vengeance gripped brain of the cowboy. He gently took her hand...

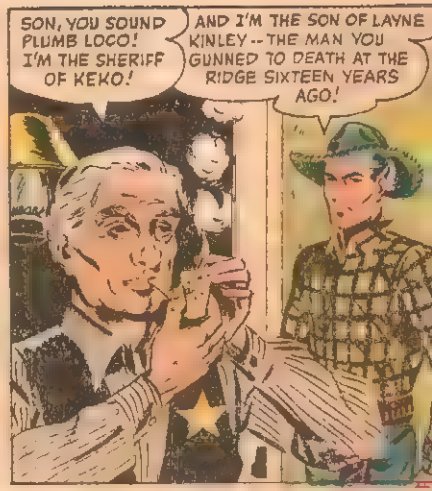


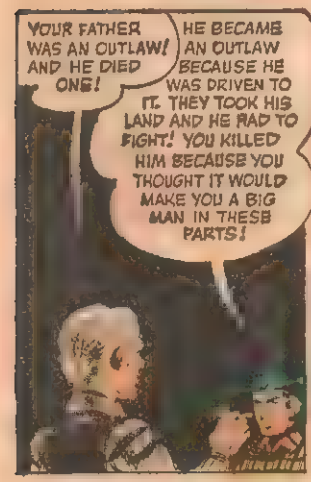



Marsha had found in the strength of Tex's embrace the single fleeting moment of their kiss—that one man alone would possess her heart forever. Each day at sunset she rode out to Mesa Ridge to find him there...
THERE'S SOME CONSOLATION IN KNOWING THAT I CAN ALWAYS FIND YOU HERE AT SUNSET, SINCE YOU NEVER ACCEPT MY INVITATION TO HAVE DINNER AT MY HOUSE—OR TO MEET MY FOLKS!
DARLING... I MEAN... WELL, YOU SHOULDN'T BE COMING OUT HERE EVERYDAY LIKE THIS!
YOU CALLED ME DARLING! IS THAT SOMETHING YOU WANT TO APOLOGIZE FOR, TOO?
NO, MARSHA—BUT I SHOULDN'T BE SAYING THOSE THINGS TO YOU! AND YOU OUGHTN'T TO BE COMING DOWN TO SEE ME EACH DAY!
Tex noticed the tear welling in her eye, and something stronger, more compelling than any impulse he'd ever known—made him draw the girl into his arms. Their lips met now, in equal intensity, in an upsurge of love that would not be denied...
I LOVE YOU, TEX—I LOVE YOU!
MY DARLING!
MARSHA—THIS CAN'T HAPPEN! I HAVEN'T THE RIGHT!
OH, TEX—WHY? WHY DO YOU SAY THIS? WHY DO YOU GO ON TORTURING BOTH OF US THIS WAY? WHAT IS IT THAT STANDS BETWEEN US AND LOVE?
I'VE COME TO KEKO TO HUNT A MAN DOWN—TO KILL HIM! LOVING ME CAN ONLY HURT YOU!
The hate in his eyes was a fearful, blood chilling hunger that would only be appeased by death itself. Marsha saw that—but this was the man she loved—the one her heart had chosen. She couldn't let that love be trampled by the merciless hoofs of vengeance!
BUT, TEX—YOU CAN'T MEAN THAT! NOT NOW, AFTER WE'VE FOUND EACH OTHER—AFTER WE'VE SO MUCH TO LIVE FOR!
I CAN'T TALK ABOUT IT, MARSHA! I WON'T CHANGE MY MIND! YOU'D BE BETTER OFF TO FORGET ABOUT ME RIGHT NOW!

*The word had gotten around in the mysterious way it usually did across the prairie grapevine—that Tex was out to kill a man! But who? Before the rumor became strong enough to upset his plans, Tex knew he had to make a move...*

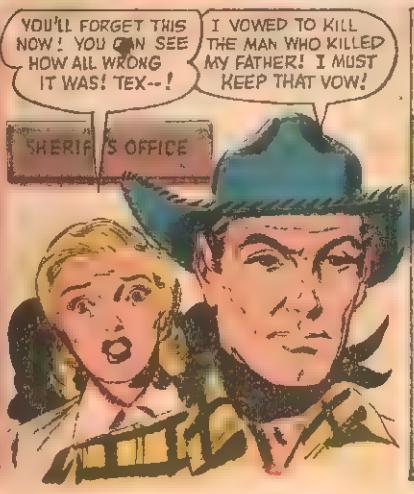


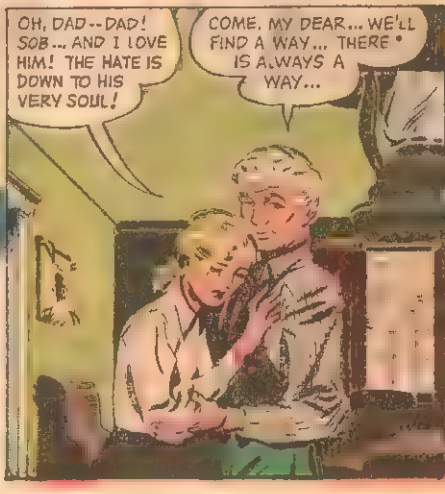



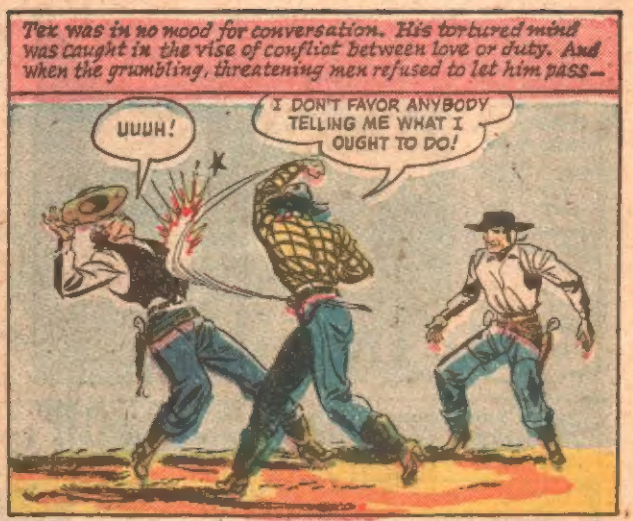

*That was the moment Fate chose for Marsha to enter. Tex's last words struck like a whiplash across her bared heart.*

*An air of stark unreality hung about the room. It was as though Barbara had awakened in the middle of a nightmare... to learn her deepest fears were not a dream at all! She turned to Tex -- but his hate was a barrier not even her love could surmount!*

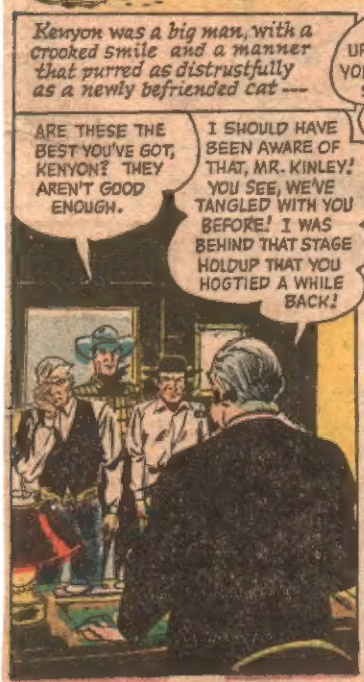


MEANWHILE ...
BRUK KENYON WANTS TO SEE YOU! HE'S WAITING FOR YOU OVER AT HIS OFFICE RIGHT NOW!
DON'T KNOW HIM! IF HE AIMS TO TALK TO ME, HE CAN COME TO ME! TAKE YOUR PAWS OFF ME!

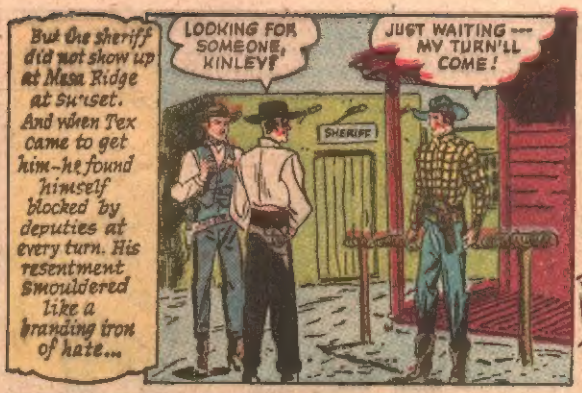

Tex was in no mood for conversation. His tortured mind was caught in the vise of conflict between love or duty. And when the grumbling, threatening men refused to let him pass—
UUUH!
I DON'T FAVOR ANYBODY TELLING ME WHAT I OUGHT TO DO!

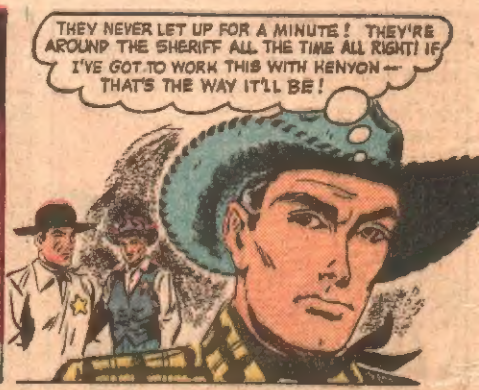
HOLD IT! ALL RIGHT, BOYS, RECKON I'LL SEE THIS KENYON AFTER ALL. HIS INVITATION'S MADE ME PLUMB CURIOUS.
HE'S FASTER'N A RING-TAIL BOBCAT!


Kenyon was a big man, with a crooked smile and a manner that purred as distrustfully as a newly befriended cat ---
ARE THESE THE BEST YOU'VE GOT, KENYON? THEY AREN'T GOOD ENOUGH.
I SHOULD HAVE BEEN AWARE OF THAT, MR. KINLEY! YOU SEE, WE'VE TANGLED WITH YOU BEFORE! I WAS BEHIND THAT STAGE HOLDUP THAT YOU HOGTIED A WHILE BACK!

I WANT YOU TO JOIN UP WITH US. WE KNOW YOU'RE OUT TO KILL THE SHERIFF — AND WE COULD BE OF SOME HELP TO YOU!
I DON'T COTTON TO THAT SORT OF HELP, KENYON. I DON'T WANT ANY PART OF YOU AND THE KIND OF DEALS YOU SET UP!

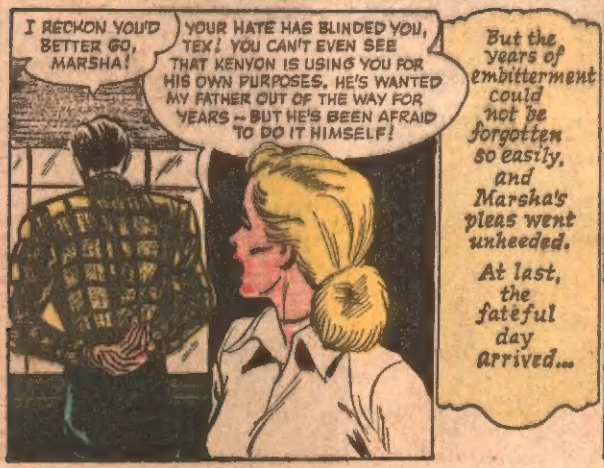
WANT US TO STOP HIM, BOSS?
THINK YOU CAN? BUT NEVER MIND — WHEN HE FINDS THE SHERIFF'S DEPUTIES IN HIS HAIR, HE'LL BE BACK! HE'LL BE BACK!


But the sheriff did not show up at Mesa Ridge at sunset. And when Tex came to get him—he found himself blocked by deputies at every turn. His resentment smouldered like a branding iron of hate...
LOOKING FOR SOMEONE, KINLEY?
JUST WAITING — MY TURN'LL COME!
SHERIFF


THEY NEVER LET UP FOR A MINUTE! THEY'RE AROUND THE SHERIFF ALL THE TIME ALL RIGHT! IF I'VE GOT TO WORK THIS WITH KENYON — THAT'S THE WAY IT'LL BE!

And so, unreasoning revenge drove Tex to join Kenyon's gang. Learning this, Marsha ran to his room—ready to plead before the man she truly loved...
MARSHA—! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?
OH, TEX! I'D PRAYED YOU'D COME TO YOUR SENSES! BUT NOW, YOU'VE JOINED UP WITH KENYON! CAN'T YOU SEE—YOU'RE RUINING YOUR LIFE ...MY LIFE... DESTROYING THE LAST CHANCE OUR LOVE MIGHT HAVE!

IF YOUR FATHER HAD COME OUT INTO THE OPEN LIKE A MAN—I WOULDN'T HAVE GONE TO KENYON!
IT WAS ONLY FOR MY SAKE THAT HE DIDN'T. HE KNOWS I LOVE YOU. HE THOUGHT, TOO—YOU WOULD LOSE YOUR BITTERNESS, THAT MY LOVING YOU MIGHT—


I RECKON YOU'D BETTER GO, MARSHA!
YOUR HATE HAS BLINDED YOU, TEX! YOU CAN'T EVEN SEE THAT KENYON IS USING YOU FOR HIS OWN PURPOSES. HE'S WANTED MY FATHER OUT OF THE WAY FOR YEARS—BUT HE'S BEEN AFRAID TO DO IT HIMSELF!
But the years of embitterment could not be forgotten so easily, and Marsha's pleas went unheeded.
At last, the fateful day arrived...

HERE'S HOW WE'LL DO THIS! WE'LL COME UP FROM THE BACK AND SURPRISE THEM! YOU TAKE THE DEPUTIES AND LEAVE ME THE SHERIFF! I WANT TO TAKE HIM TO MESA RIDGE FOR A DUEL!
YOU CAN HAVE HIM! HE'S THE FASTEST GUN-SLINGER THIS SIDE OF DODGE CITY!

*Tex forced himself to tear his gaze away from the tear-filled eyes of the girl who claimed his heart. The sheriff whispered several hurried words to his daughter, that Tex took for a tender farewell—and Marsha ran sobbingly from the office...*

Back to back, the two men started a march that could end only in death for one or both! Then the tattoo of galloping hoofs shattered the ominous stillness--
DAD--! TEX--!
SHOOT, KINLEY! SHOOT!
YOU CAN'T SHOOT NOW--YOU MUSTN'T!
And suddenly Tex knew that Marsha was right--he couldn't kill anyone dear to the girl he loved. The tears from her stricken eyes were extinguishing the fires of hatred which had burned so long in his heart!
MARSHA--I JUST WANT TO SAY--
DON'T SAY ANYTHING TEX! JUST READ THIS LETTER! DAD SENT ME FOR IT WHEN YOU BROKE INTO HIS OFFICE! IT'S WRITTEN BY YOUR OWN MOTHER!
Dear Sheriff Nixon: I have just learned that the $5,000 pension I received was actually your reward money for shooting my husband. To ease your mind, I want you to know that before Layne left me, he told me he regretted his evil deeds and he realized that no reason is strong enough for turning outlaw. He said he deserved to die just the way he'd killed many others without reason...
Tex was thunderstruck! He had been raised by the money of the very man he sought to kill! Bruck Kenyon understood the meaning of this hesitancy and, rattler-like, he struck. But Tex and the sheriff were alert and ready!
YOU'RE NOT BACKING DOWN NOW, KINLEY--
YOW!
RECKON NOT, KENYON!
BANG!
ANY MORE SHOTS WILL BE AIMED TO KILL!
GET STARTED INTO TOWN, KENYON--ON FOOT!
OH, TEX--DAD! YOU'RE ON THE SAME SIDE--AT LAST!
In humiliating defeat at the hands of two of the fastest gun-handlers in the West, Kenyon and his men marched sullenly ahead. While a cowboy and his girl knew that on the brink of life's greatest tragedy--they had discovered its greatest happiness...